

In Somno Veritas

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/9372596) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/9372596>.

Rating:

[Mature](#)

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Category:

[M/M](#)

Fandom:

[Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling](#)

Relationship:

[Harry Potter/Voldemort](#)

Characters:

[Harry Potter](#), [Tom Riddle](#) | [Voldemort](#), [Ron Weasley](#), [Hermione Granger](#), [Albus Dumbledore](#)

Additional Tags:

[light!harry](#), [Hurt/Comfort](#), [Angst](#), [Drama](#), [Romance](#), [Nudity](#), [Torture](#), [Half-Blood Prince AU](#), [Horcruxes](#), [Emotional Rollercoaster](#), [all the feels](#), [Somehow it works](#), [Body Horror](#)

Language:

[English](#)

Stats:

Published: 2017-01-17 Completed: 2017-01-18 Words: 158,090
Chapters: 10/10

In Somno Veritas

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Summary

"Are you often in my dreams, Harry? I have not touched your mind since our little encounter at the Department of Mysteries... and yet here you are... saving me in my nightmares."

An LV/HP alternate universe story set during Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince. (Reposted after Ansketil's account was hacked)

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Part I

In Somno Veritas

*In my pain
I murdered her in my thoughts last night.
And in my dreams I held her.
I could not live, I told her
Unless she let me be an animal again.*

- Anonymous

"Too late, Harry! You shall hear the story another time. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

The door swung shut with a loud *clunk*, leaving Harry alone in the hall.

Harry climbed onto the moving staircase with a frown, feeling even more confused than he had when he'd entered the headmaster's office earlier that evening. Dumbledore had promised him that he was going to start telling Harry everything, no more holding back. So why was he still refusing to answer Harry's questions?

The bottom of the stairway came into view, and the gargoyle guarding the hall outside leapt out of his way. Sighing heavily, Harry adjusted his bag on his shoulder and headed off in the direction of the Gryffindor common room, where Ron and Hermione were expecting to hear about all of the advanced magic that Dumbledore was teaching him. And what would Harry have to tell them? He'd been so excited when Dumbledore had offered Harry private lessons, but despite Dumbledore's assurances that the lessons would be useful to Harry in the long-run, he could not understand how learning about Voldemort's family would ever help him in a duel with the Dark Lord.

Unless Harry would ever have to run for his life from a cross-eyed Parselmouth. Right. He certainly knew how to do that now; thanks, Professor Dumbledore.

But as Harry rounded the corner toward the common room, he couldn't stop thinking about the crazed look in Marvolo's eye as he'd leapt at the Ministry official, a bloody knife raised high above his

head. Well, at least Harry knew that he and Voldemort had something else in common: their relatives were both absolutely loony.

Hermione and Ron were both sitting by the fireplace when Harry climbed through the portrait hole. They were, as expected, eager to hear all of the details of his evening with the headmaster, but Harry found that he was not as excited to speak to them as he had been earlier. He sat with them briefly and explained what Dumbledore had shown him, but the longer that he talked about the Gaunts and their decrepit home in Little Hangleton, the more disturbed he became with the memory. He did not linger to discuss what Dumbledore had meant by showing him this, dismissing himself just as Hermione had opened her mouth to offer her own analysis.

He just needed to sleep. He would wake up in the morning, go to his classes, and forget all about the Gaunts and their abusive violence.

But the sad, crooked gaze of Merope Gaunt continued to burn in Harry's mind as he closed his eyes and drifted off into the darkness.

Lord Voldemort did not often dream of the Riddle house. When he did it was of the manor as it was now: dust thick on old floorboards, interrupted only by Wormtail's footprints and the winding trails of lovely Nagini. Flailing weak, fetal limbs and crying out in the night for the milk of his Horcrux. Nightmares that he would never escape such a form.

Of the late summer of his father's death and the tableau of dead Riddles left in his wake, Voldemort had not dreamed for many years. Yet here he stood, in the lane which he had walked long ago, gazing down at the sleepy village of Little Hangleton and the fine house standing on the other side of the valley... waiting for him.

The air was fragrant with wild flowers, the dry earth warm beneath him. Voldemort breathed deeply, savouring the scented air, staring up at the hazy afternoon sky. The trees buzzed and chirped and rustled around him. He did not know whether he was that same boy with his uncle's wand in his pocket, a future lord intruding upon summers past, or a formless ghost - merely a spectator in his own memories.

He looked toward his mother's home, at the end up a steep little track the hovel nestled under the thick shade of ancient trees. Just visible, a dead snake rattled in the breeze, its tail nailed to the door.

A boy stood in the overgrown garden, black-haired and pale. He

seemed to fit amongst the neglected shrubs and encircling weeds - lost in thought.

Perhaps it was himself, preparing to hide Marvolo's ring. It had been summer then too, he recalled, and new Muggles had been living in his father's home. Voldemort watched the young man curiously, walking toward him down the path, wondering whether he might speak to him or if this dream was like a pensieve and the boy-Riddle could not see him.

The boy's shoulders were hunched as he stood amongst the feral remains of a potion-maker's garden. Voldemort could see the tall stalks of asphodel shooting up amongst the grass, heavy with yellow flowers. The pungent stench of fluxweed arose from underfoot. Perhaps the child had just shed a piece of soul and had come to return Morfin's wand. It had hurt the first few times, a raw hollowing of something deep inside. A jagged ache of loss. Lord Voldemort pitied the boy: still so fraught with emotion, just beginning his metamorphosis.

He reached for him, brushing his fingers across the child's arm.

Harry was very familiar with strange dreams. Ever since he had been very small, nightmares from another's life, another's mind, would interrupt his childlike night-time visions of motorcycles and candy canes, and he'd awaken in the dusty darkness of his cupboard with a cry, shivering and sweating and weeping all at once. His shaking hand would yank the chain before he was even fully awake, filling the small cabinet with yellow light; and Harry would fall asleep once more this way, cracking an eyelid open every so often to assure himself that those awful red eyes weren't hiding in the corner of his makeshift bedroom.

The dreams had, of course, increased in both frequency and variety over the years. When Harry had been introduced to the wonderful, frightening world of magic, he'd quickly made the connection between the demon with the red eyes in the nursery with the monster that was Lord Voldemort. He had learned that the dreams could be useful - take, for instance, the traumatizing but fortunate vision the year before that had saved Mr. Weasley's life. He'd also been manipulated by them, leading to the death of his godfather and his terrifying encounter with Voldemort himself in the Ministry of Magic last year as well.

Harry was no stranger to strange dreams - and yet the first thing that he thought, stirring on his back in the garden, was that this one was stranger than usual.

The first thing was the flowers. Even before Harry opened his eyes, he could smell them, rich and pungent. There were never any flowers in the dreams, not in dreams that belonged to himself, nor to *him*, either. The only other dreams that Harry had ever received from Voldemort had always focused on something that the man deeply desired (and mind you, it was just as unlikely that the Dark Lord was desperately longing to drown in a flowerbed), so Harry could only assume that, no, this dream was all his own.

But that wasn't right. Harry had shared enough dreams with Lord Voldemort to know that he was not alone.

His fingers grabbed at the loose, warm earth, and he pushed himself up slowly. It was a garden, alright, albeit a small one. Harry frowned as he climbed to his feet, looking around at the bright yellow flowers, the brown grass. He plucked a leaf - green, a leaf of summer - out of his hair, and looked about him. He had been here before, but when, and where?

He then turned his gaze to the right, and the answer came to him in an instant: he had been here only hours ago, but, at the time, he had looked at the scene in shades of sepia. And yet, here he was, standing in the overgrown garden of the Gaunt family, full of all the vivid color and life of any summer afternoon. The details were as clear as reality, not the faded, blurry images of the Ministry official's memory.

Harry's heart began to pound as he caught sight of the dead snake nailed to the door. Perhaps this was why Dumbledore had decided to show him the memories instead of teaching him advanced defensive magic. Perhaps he knew that Harry would dream of this place tonight - and Harry was expected to find something here, something that Dumbledore couldn't find himself. A mission, just for Harry, like a regular, useful member of the Order.

He was so caught up in his excitement that he did not hear the rustling approach of the intruder behind him.

An unexpected touch grazed the hairs of his left arm, and Harry jumped, barely restraining a cry as he whirled about in surprise. A handsome man stared back at him, tall and aristocratic. His gray eyes were curious, his neat, dark hair falling in such a way that made

Harry feel very conscious of the unruly curls atop his own head. Perhaps this was the person that Dumbledore had sent him here to find.

Harry could only stand there, staring at the man dumbly, like an animal caught grazing defenceless in the middle of a wood. And then, a moment of wild recognition, and Harry's eyes widened behind his spectacles.

"You're Tom Riddle." It was the handsome Muggle boy in the carriage, the one that Merope had been hanging out the window to see - Harry was sure of it. He had only caught a brief glimpse of the man at the time, but looking at this person now, he was certain that they were one and the same. But why would Dumbledore want Harry to speak to Voldemort's father?

Harry looked at him warily, making sure to keep his distance as he spoke. Perhaps there was more to the Muggle than Dumbledore had let on; perhaps that was the reason Harry was here. "You live down in the village, no?" Harry said, trying to keep his voice casual. "Why are you here?"

Harry Potter. *Harry Potter*. In his dreams - in *his* thoughts. Had he chosen Potter to say these things to him? Surely this was a true dream, for the boy to know such things! Those green eyes were bright and determined and leaves were caught in Potter's dark hair. He looked so *right* standing there in Voldemort's mindscape - native. As real as the stench of rotting snake under the perfume of the flowers. *I thought you was that Muggle... you look mighty like that Muggle...*

"How *dare* you!" he spat furiously, breath coming fast. But he bit down on it almost immediately as the green stare darkened and Potter's mouth tightened. This could be an opportunity. The boy didn't know who Voldemort was - he was vulnerable. And if this was truly a dream then Voldemort lost nothing by his deception, acrid though it was; sliding against his spirit like sandpaper. "My family own all the land for miles - we hardly live *down in the village*." He sniffed, acting the blustering Muggle. "Who are *you*, in any case? Skulking around in someone else's garden. A thieving tramp, no doubt." It was strangely cathartic.

For a moment, Harry could clearly see the man's son in the furious flash of his eyes, the twist of his mouth - so clearly that Harry might have believed that this was in fact Voldemort himself. Alarmed, Harry

stumbled backward at the outburst, nearly tripping over his own feet in the process.

But, no, it couldn't be. The Muggle was offended at Harry's implication, not at Harry's presence here in this strange, sweet-smelling dream. And it was Voldemort's father, after all; of course the man would have his temper. Between Marvolo's delusions of blood superiority and this man's high-nosed snobbery, it was no wonder that Voldemort had turned out a little touched in the head.

"My apologies, sir," said Harry quickly. He folded his hands behind his back, bowed his head a little, and generally did his best to look respectful. If Uncle Vernon's near-constant berating was anything to go by, however, this was not something at which Harry usually succeeded. "I didn't realize. I'm not from around these parts."

Damnit, Harry thought before the words had even finished leaving his mouth. It was a lame excuse, considering that Harry had known the man's name - and at first sight, no less. He needed to do better than that. He couldn't botch this up now, not when Dumbledore had finally trusted Harry with something significant. Tom Riddle knew something important to the Order, and it was up to Harry to figure out what.

"I was only ... looking for a friend," Harry said. "From school, I mean. I know that his mother lives here. You wouldn't happen to know anything about her, would you?"

Voldemort stared at the boy. The brazenness of the question was staggering. Surely he realised that, even if Voldemort *were* Tom Riddle, he would not respond kindly to a question such as that. Tilting his head, he stared at Potter almost curiously - as though encountering a new species of some kind. Idly, he mulled over the possibility of drawing his wand: *limbs twisting up in agony, body thrashing amongst the weeds, until the vacant green eyes stared dumbly up at the sky, the mind behind them shattered beyond repair*. He couldn't *kill* Potter, true, but that didn't mean the boy couldn't feel the wrath of Lord Voldemort.

"No one of *that sort* has lived here for a number of years," he said quietly, glancing at the dilapidated shack and the corpse of the serpent pinned to its door. "I don't imagine Morfin Gaunt could afford to send any child of his to school - nor, indeed, attract a wife. Besides, most village boys are off fighting the Germans - are you sure your friend hasn't enlisted?" Voldemort's face felt a little stiff - he hadn't had to use his politely helpful smile for decades and he wondered -

simultaneously - whether he was getting the expression quite right and why, in Slytherin's name, he was entertaining Potter's delusions at all. Yet there was something in speaking to the boy thus, and a part of him felt genuinely intrigued. Where on earth did Potter think he was going to take his claim of knowing Voldemort himself?

Although Riddle gave no outward indication that he recognized the woman in question, there was something about the sudden chill in his eyes that put Harry on edge. Harry was not nearly as quick as Hermione at catching on to the subtleties of human behaviour, but it was clear to him that Riddle was keeping something from him.

He just needed to figure out how to get it.

As if in response to this very thought, there was suddenly a solid weight pressing against his hip, a sensation that was not unlike the stone presenting itself to him in his first year. He knew what it was even before he reached into his pocket to investigate, fingers brushing against cool, smooth metal. Inspiration struck him - perhaps if he could at least get Riddle to crack and admit that he had known Merope in a less than platonic sense of the word, he might get the man talking, and find out whatever Dumbledore had sent him here for.

And leave. That was important. There was something not quite right about this whole thing, and it was beginning to make Harry feel very uncomfortable.

"He grew up in an orphanage, sir," Harry said, "but he told me this was the home of his mother and uncle. And I'm certain that he hasn't enlisted; he's not exactly the soldier type." The image of Voldemort on a Muggle battlefield nearly startled a snort out of him. "Actually, I had something of his that he left in my care. I was hoping to return it to him."

He pulled Merope's locket from his robes casually, like a stranger sharing an interesting souvenir, the golden chain woven between his fingers. "Clunky thing, isn't it?" he added with a nervous laugh. Perhaps this Muggle would open up to him if Harry shared his dislike of the Gaunts and all things magical.

The golden locket shone in the afternoon sun, chain dangling casually from Potter's fingers, the glittering emerald 'S' swaying a little in the breeze. The boy displayed the heirloom like someone selling a cheap

gewgaw, wrinkling his nose as he did so. Voldemort felt his face go slack, his eyes go wide, and his mouth fall open. *How?!* There were no words. They remained, hoarse and inarticulate, trapped in the back of his throat. *How did Potter know?* The Dark Lord reeled, hoping this was merely some wild conceiving of his subconscious, a paranoid fantasy banished by waking. *Yet there Potter was*, clutching his ancestor's treasured legacy - *Lord Voldemort's Horcrux* - "Clunky thing, isn't it?" he commented with a casual smile, glasses magnifying the sharp gleam in the boy's green eyes. And in Voldemort's terrified heart, dream and reality merged into one red-slicked nightmare.

All thought of deceit fled from Voldemort's mind. This was *his* mind, *his* memory. Light bled from the sky, draining away garden and valley and air. The ground fell away into nightmare: the shapeless agony of the shard of soul left to the Dark Lord; the formless peregrinations that ruined what was left of his sanity as much as his spirit and, beyond that, the icy claws of death itself - the horror of Voldemort's deepest terror subsumed everything in its wake.

"Sir," Harry began to say, but then the garden earth was trembling beneath his feet and Harry almost lost his footing. The boy glanced up in terror at Riddle, whose face was still contorting, distorting, twisting right before Harry's eyes, the ground rolling in steady waves from where he stood. And why the hell should *that* be happening?! The Muggle was a figment of Harry's imagination - a memory of a person who was long-dead. He was the dreamt, not the dreamer. But before Harry could get too indignant, the sky opened up above their heads, brilliant, blinding white light pouring over them. The tiny, crumbling shack was consumed by it, the village at the bottom of the hill melting into a blur of colours and darkness - and Riddle was still changing as well, his face growing paler, his hair falling in dark clumps from his head, his eyes blazing brighter -

Fear, entirely Harry's own, crashed down on him like a wave, knocking the breath out of him in a terrible moment of realization.

"*You!*" Harry cried. His face twisted in abject horror as his hand flew to his pocket, nearly dropping the locket in the process - but there was no wand at his hip, no means to defend himself against Lord Voldemort. Dread clenched a tight fist in his stomach, and he stumbled further backward, the world a swirling, awful blend of blinding light and bubbling darkness.

And then he broke; He was nothing, nothing but pain and terror... The pain was so terrible... ripped from his body... But if he had no body, why did his head hurt so badly; if he was dead, how could he feel such unbearable pain, did it not cease with death, didn't it go—? Voldemort screamed, enraged howls of agony, feeling himself unravelling along with the earth. And the boy watched as he had watched that night, wide-eyed and scared but alive - gazing as Lord Voldemort was felled by his own spell.

The one thing he dreaded: the discovery of his past, his Horcruxes. It could not be true - it was impossible... *What if... what if the boy knew about the others?* But surely if the boy had found any of his Horcruxes, he, Lord Voldemort, would have known, would have felt it? He, the greatest wizard of them all; he, the most powerful... How could Lord Voldemort not have known?

Fear flared around him - he would destroy Potter - torture him until he possessed every secret the boy's mind possessed! But, even as he drew it, his wand slipped from his fingers as it had that Halloween night, and his hands tore away into shadow and vapour. Helpless, he cried and raged. Lightning blazed across the sky, the brilliant green of murder, and the icy claws of death engulfed everything in the maelstrom of Voldemort's terror.

Memories flashed and twisted: anti-aircraft guns going off in the night like hundreds of wizards apparating at once; a small boy covered in welts and bruises begging to be let out; an eleven year old trying to fight his way back to the light flickering at the surface far above him, as his Slytherin robes impeded him and water filled his lungs; bloody, broken glass shone, rippling with the light of an incendiary bomb, more still shrieking from the sky; bloody torture inflicted and inflicting; the forest of agony, of surviving second by second, of keeping himself from oblivion by inhabiting the tiny, terrified minds of small creatures or else risk a madness deprived of life, of scent or touch; a loneliness beyond imagining; a feral world of predator and prey; control or death; fear racing everywhere like wildfire, the stench of the dead and the dying rising like black smoke. Atrocity piled upon atrocity...

This was it. Harry had failed Dumbledore, he had failed the Order, and now he was going to die. Before, he might not have thought it possible - but as the world rippled and screamed around him, darkness flooding in and out between surges of lightning, his fingers empty of a wand, Harry felt like he was in more danger now than he'd ever been in the waking daylight.

I will die bravely, Harry thought. *I will die fighting*. But Voldemort did not make a move to lunge at him. The Dark Lord seemed to be rooted to the ground, body folding in on itself, flashes of lightning illuminating the pain distorting his features. If Harry didn't know that this was Lord Voldemort, he might have almost felt sorry for him.

And then Voldemort opened his mouth and screamed and screamed and screamed, a sound that ground against Harry's eardrums, and the earth undulated beneath Harry's feet, nearly sending him sprawling across the ground, the wind climbing to a roar in his ears. If Voldemort didn't kill Harry himself, surely this nightmare would do the job for him. *Calm down, he just needs to calm down, and then we can both wake up...*

"Do you want this back?" Harry shouted over the gale, holding up the locket, heavy pendant swinging in the wind. But Voldemort was still shrieking, his fingers clawing at his own head, and Harry did not think that he had heard.

"Oi! *Riddle!*" It was remarkably easier to find his confidence when Voldemort was not glaring at him with those horrible eyes. The ground was starting to split, and Harry saw with a jolt of terror that there was lava, red and hot and bubbling up out of the earth from a gash like a bleeding wound. Harry sucked in his breath and flew forward without a second thought, terrified and determined. The air crackled with terrible, powerful energy as Harry drew nearer, but Voldemort was going to send the world crashing down around them if Harry didn't stop him. His hand shaking, as though reaching out toward a wild beast, Harry extended his arm and grabbed the Dark Lord's shoulder.

The touch was warm and human and wrenching - it burned and it comforted - a steady grip and a torturous seizure all at once. But it did not go through him, Voldemort could *feel* its heat and its call, tugging at him like a line, a vicious hook ripping into his flesh, trying to reel him in...

It was fierce and dizzying, one more thing attacking him; he didn't want it on him, *in* him. Voldemort drew back blindly, hissing in pain, lost in the lurid nightmares continuing to assault him, the one conscious thought in his mind to snatch the locket away, wildly clawing, his skeletal corporeal-incorporeal hands renting the air.

Harry nearly drew back in a fresh surge of panic, but with his touch

on Voldemort's arm, the wind had begun to die, the shaking of the earth diminished to a steady trembling - it was all the encouragement that Harry needed.

Summoning his courage, he grabbed Voldemort's flailing wrists with both of his hands, the locket still swinging between them, the chain digging into the side of the Dark Lord's thumb. "*Voldemort!*"

Voldemort. Lord Voldemort. The name - *his* name; the talisman he clutched through madness: the words he struggled to form within tiny creatures bereft of words. *I am Lord Voldemort.* He threw himself toward it: *Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort...* as it gripped him and dragged him from the abyss.

It was *here*, his treasure, his Horcrux - Lord Voldemort most important and precious - he could feel its heart beating with his. His soul's mirror. He broke the snare that had hold of his wrists and snatched at it without thought, flinging his thin, brittle limbs around it, holding it close. *His and safe, safe, safe...* It breathed his breath, nestling close. And - *thank Slytherin!* - he was embodied: face, fingers, lungs and warmth; *sweet warmth* that smelt of Hogwarts, wild flowers and dry, fragrant earth. It smelt of *home*.

Well, this was awkward.

"Er," Harry said, shifting, but this only caused Voldemort to cling to him tighter, breathing deeply and fingers convulsing against Harry's shoulders. The wind had stopped altogether now, and daylight was beginning to seep back into the sky, grass sprouting where there had been torn, blackened earth. And Voldemort - well, he looked almost peaceful this way, his face relaxed and content in the crook of Harry's neck. An entirely different person. If nothing else, at least this was preferable to Voldemort bringing down the dreamscape in a terrified rage. Awkwardly, Harry rested his palm on his enemy's back, watching as Voldemort's recovery manifested itself in the gradual rebirth of the world around them.

Voldemort's mind rose gradually from the darkness of nightmare, his fear hollowing out as he clung to the Horcrux in his arms. It almost seemed to him as if he were embracing himself. The soul blossoming out around him to comfort and caress; a hand slowly brushing down the knotty rope of his spine. He whispered endearments to the locket in Parseltongue, stroking it possessively, reassuring himself that they

were both safe.

He opened his eyes, blinking up at the sunlight and the azure sky. He was still in the Gaunt garden, but Harry Potter was thankfully nowhere to be seen. What a bizarre dream, bizarre and terrifying beyond measure. If he remembered this when he woke up, Voldemort would be sure to check the safety of all his Horcruxes - perhaps even move the ring and the locket if were true Potter and Dumbledore knew about the orphanage and his parents. The locket was the next easily traced. He had not killed Dennis or little Amy - a powerful wizard might break the charms he laid upon them.

He glanced down, still wrapped around his precious Horcrux. The locket lay at their feet, its emeralds twinkling. The Dark Lord loosened his grip in order to bend down and pick it up. It felt light between his fingers, no aura of power surrounding it. Softly, Voldemort ordered it to open, one arm still around its avatar.

It was empty. As it had been before he'd imbued it with his soul. Voldemort jerked back in surprise, almost dropping the thing. Harry Potter stood there, clearly embarrassed and as confused as Voldemort himself. It was *inside* the boy, the Dark Lord's sense of it had lessened but it was *still there*, that impossible aura of comfort, of *self*. How was this possible? *Had Potter swallowed the real locket?*

...And he had killed the boy, and yet he was the boy... "Oh..." he breathed with soft sibilance, amazed and yet still calmed by his astonishing discovery. Anger would have its day - shame and fury both would come for him, he knew. For he hated this boy with every shred of his being. But he could not summon the energy, steeped as he was in shock. It was obvious now. Everything else - the trees, the sky, the house across the valley - was naught compared to the presence he had sensed, the reflection he had seen from the beginning. "How foolish I have been."

Potter shifted on his feet, clearly uncomfortable. "Er, glad we're on the same page, then." The boy offered him a wary smile. "Right, here's an idea: we walk in separate directions until we wake up, and neither of us will ever mention it again."

Voldemort smiled, seeing Potter's fear written so clearly across his nervous face. The Dark Lord took another step back, straightening to his full, imposing height. But the smile remained. And for once it was not a taut leer or a mad, sadistic gash in the milky skin. It quivered a little, as though the requisite muscles in the man's cheeks had

atrophied from long disuse. For a second, it was again possible to see the handsome Tom Riddle in the hairless, etiolated face. A soft, chilly laugh sounded on the air. *Potter was his Horcrux*. Trust was what he needed from the boy now - to lull him away from Dumbledore and into the Dark Lord's keeping.

"What wizard would believe us," he grinned savagely at the supreme irony of his and Potter's situation, his crimson eyes glittering with the formation of a plan, "even if we did?" Lord Voldemort had always been able to charm those he needed.

This seemed to startle a laugh out of Potter, although it was replaced just as quickly with suspicion and not just a little fear. "Er - right. Well, as long as that's clear... I reckon that'll be all then." The boy took a step backwards. "I'll... um... see you around, I s'pose."

"Are you often in my dreams, Harry?" Voldemort asked, wanting to halt Potter's footsteps. He added a dash of danger to the words, a threatening hiss that pulled the boy back like an undertow. Yet the smile lingered. "I have not touched your mind since our little encounter at the Department of Mysteries... and yet here you are... saving me in my nightmares." He raised a hairless brow and the shining scarlet eyes - narrow with humour rather than cruelty - inviting Potter to share in the joke; to stand and talk awhile under the dappled shade of ancient trees.

"I was hardly *trying* to dream about you, if that's what you're implying," Potter blurted out, and then he seemed to remember himself. "I - am the boy saviour, though, if you haven't heard," he went on weakly. "I suppose I can add dream warrior to my résumé, too."

It was a poor joke, but Voldemort threw his head back and laughed. That terrifying, mad laughter - that all wizards feared would be the last thing they ever heard - was suffused for once with a genuine mirth. "Dream warrior..." he tasted the words on his forked tongue, still chuckling, watching the boy carefully. "You have Lord Voldemort's thanks." He leant casually against the garden gate. "You know, I do believe I once read a book with that same title at Hogwarts. The author was disgustingly Freudian, if I recall correctly, but you might enjoy the chapter on traversing another's mindscape."

Freudian. As in ... *Sigmund Freud*? Had Voldemort just referred to a *Muggle* psychologist? The image of a young Tom Riddle perusing

Muggle literature in the Hogwarts library flickered across Harry's inner eye. He supposed that young Voldemort and Hermione might have been very good friends, in this alternate universe where Voldemort apparently enjoyed doing things other than torturing and killing people. And let's not forget the smiling.

Harry realized that his jaw had gone a little slack, and he shut it with an audible *click*. "Um... what did it say, then? Anything insightful?"

"It's a book defending Hypno-Legilimentic therapy. I read it because it proposes a number of techniques by which Legilimency can become less intrusive and therefore more covert. But a great deal of the material deals with exploring the sleeping mind of another wizard. And since you seem to have found your way into Lord Voldemort's mind without any such skills, I imagine you might find the book quite informative..."

Definitely would have been friends with Hermione, Harry decided. He attempted to keep up with Voldemort but gave up after the third sentence, resorting to nodding and looking as intelligent as he could - an appearance he often assumed whenever Hermione was rattling off information that was far above the requirement of their year.

"...Just ignore all the tripe about sexual repression."

Blink. Blinkblinkblink. Wait ... *what?!*

A furious flush rose to Harry's cheeks before he could entirely process what had happened. He forgot to nod intelligently at that last part, instead staring with wide eyes and a gaping mouth at the Dark Lord. "Er, I," he stammered, feeling profoundly stupid, "I don't ... I don't think that that would be - er - particularly relevant to my interests anyway. Sir. But, I, yes. I'll be sure to look into that."

Shut up, Harry. Just shut up. This could not possibly get any more mortifying.

Voldemort tilted his head, staring at Potter curiously. *This* was the vaunted hope of so many witches and wizards? This stammering, flushing teenager? He wasn't quite sure where to go from here. He had wanted to arouse Harry's curiosity, let him know that he - Voldemort - could be a useful source of knowledge, persuading him to return to the Dark Lord's mind. He had not expected this... effusion of embarrassment. As a boy, he would have jumped at the chance of a mentor willing to discuss forbidden magic.

Peering at Potter, he pushed himself off from the fence. "What *did* bring you here tonight, Harry?" There was no sense wasting such vulnerability, after all. His voice was light, as if he had only just thought of the question, his sanguine eyes luminous even in the day.

Harry's gaze flickered momentarily to the run-down shack behind the Dark Lord, the question immediately calling to mind the memory that Dumbledore had shared with him earlier that evening. Swallowing, Harry quickly looked back at Voldemort, dimly aware that his cheeks were still burning.

"I've already said that I wasn't trying to dream about you. You came here on your own." The accusation was soft, matter-of-fact, lacking hostility. Harry's heart pounded hard in his chest, betraying his steady voice. "What do you want from me?"

"How interesting... you simply *found* your way here without intent, clutching my mother's locket and asking after me so solituously, as though we were schoolfellows? Why do I find that difficult to believe, I wonder?" A cold wind coiled between them and the sky darkened, bruised clouds thickening ominously. Lord Voldemort loomed over Potter, all amicability lost to the inhuman monster he was; his eyes bloody slits cut into waxen skin.

For one horrible moment, Harry thought that they were about to be plunged back into the nightmare. But before he could even begin cursing himself for being so careless, the world was bright and sunny again, and Voldemort's face had softened back into an unnatural, eerily charming smile. "Ah, look at me Harry - you see how quickly I forget that I am in your debt! Go on... ask the question that brought you here and Lord Voldemort will answer. I give you my word."

Realization dawned on him, flooding in as suddenly as the sunlight. "I *knew* you wanted something," said Harry, feeling unexpectedly angry. "The days are long gone when you could simply trade a smile for some information, *Lord Voldemort*. My purpose here is between me and Dumbledore."

"So *Dumbledore* sent you?" Voldemort breathed, not bothering to hide his cold satisfaction at Potter's mistake. Dumbledore had known his middle name, might have been able to make the connection with the Gaunts... their abandoned home was, perhaps, the least secure of his hiding places... but did the old fool know about Potter himself? Could he really have sent the boy to penetrate Lord Voldemort's mind?

Voldemort doubted it. "He told you about my parents... the Gaunts and their shack. I see his game now. But that is between myself and Dumbledore. You have helped me this night, Harry Potter, and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers. Ask your question - it need not be that one which was at the headmaster's behest."

Harry's breathing was coming a little faster with frustration, hating himself, a traitor to his own cause. An obvious blunder, and now Voldemort had figured something out - something that, to his infinite frustration, Harry hadn't even discerned himself. Another question? What else did Harry have to ask him? What could he possibly want to know about the life or motivations of this monster?

"You were ... touching me. Before." Harry all but snarled at the Dark Lord, self-loathing making him grit his teeth. "You were speaking in Parseltongue - saying things to me. About me." He dared not repeat the whispered, tender words that had assured Harry that he belonged to Voldemort, that he was safe in Voldemort's arms. "Why?"

Voldemort paused. If it had been physically possible for him to blush he might very well have. In truth, the Dark Lord had not realised that he had whispered such possessive securities to Potter. Secret, intimate murmurings between himself and his Horcrux - private reassurances, things he had never confessed to any soul but his own...

His face became completely expressionless: a sharp, blank mask seemingly carved out of bleached bone. Even the feral eyes had dulled, as though they were not eyes at all but inlaid glass, shining red but empty. "Ah... ah Harry..." The eerie tone was almost sad. Spidery fingers reached out and took hold of the boy's chin, bringing the green gaze up to meet Voldemort's own. "Such a difficult question Harry... has your beloved professor told you of what he seeks in the memories of my life? Has he imparted to you the reason for your presence here? I ask not to pry, but because my answer is dependent upon the extent of your knowledge. A mere yes or no will suffice. Lord Voldemort shall know if you lie."

That hand on his chin made him far more uncomfortable than it had any right to. A shiver ran through him, but Harry did not look away, refusing to be intimidated. He hadn't meant for his question to be an open invitation for Voldemort to *continue* touching him, but the grip on his chin was firm, and Harry didn't dare look away.

The Dark Lord's answer opened up a familiar well of frustration in Harry's chest. He remembered his fruitless attempts to convince Dumbledore to explain his injured hand during their lesson, and scowled. "You're just like him, then, No, he hasn't - he never does."

The Dark Lord nodded, refusing to acknowledge Potter's unflattering comparison, merely storing the information away and keeping hold of Potter's chin. "You were there that night..." Voldemort began, his voice much icier than it would have been had Potter not just compared him to the Headmaster, "when I told my Death Eaters of the many experiments I undertook in my quest toward immortality. Lord Voldemort has gone further toward that goal than any wizard alive. *Both of us* survived the night which made you so famous. Dumbledore is searching for the reason my spirit remained, even though my body had been destroyed."

Voldemort took a deep breath. This was a gamble. He had not told anyone of this - his deepest secret. "I... I did not recognise you before, Harry. You see, my experiments took me far beyond the limits of human experience. I tore apart my soul and placed each precious shard inside an object fit to house such a treasure. That is why the Headmaster shows you my past - he wishes to discover these vessels in order to destroy them. And... in the delirium of my nightmare... I mistook our connection for such a vessel. My apologies." He let the hand fall away, red eyes observing Potter eagerly through a façade of solemnity. Better to not let the boy know what he was right away, or else risk him dashing himself to pieces. No, Potter couldn't know about what treasure he carried in his scar - not until he was completely under control... and Voldemort had completed the necessary enchantments.

Harry's head was reeling, so much so that he didn't even notice Voldemort releasing the loathsome grip on his chin. It was too much to process, impossible and unthinkable. Was it a trap? Perhaps Voldemort was lying. Harry had never heard of any sort of magic that could tear apart one's soul, even during his lengthy escapades into the Restricted Section. And, even worse, did that make Voldemort invincible? How could Harry fulfill the prophecy and rid the world of the Dark Lord once and for all if he would simply keep coming back, his soul bound to earthly objects?

"So that's one of them, then?" said Harry, gesturing to the locket lying on the ground. That explained why Voldemort had become nearly

hysterical at the sight of the heirloom in Harry's possession. "And our ... *connection*, it feels similar to your mum's locket?" He stared incredulously at the Dark Lord. He didn't really understand how he, a living, breathing human, could be mistaken for a small piece of jewellery, no matter how delirious Voldemort had been.

Why was Voldemort offering him this information so freely, answering his questions, acting in a way that might even be construed as kind? *Where was the catch?*

"Yes." Harry watched the Dark Lord pull his hood over his head, casting his face into shadow, obscuring all but his glittering crimson eyes from Harry's sight. Dread filled in Harry's chest as he realized that Voldemort was making to leave - and to abandon Harry in this strange half-memory, half-dream constructed of the Dark Lord's twisted subconscious. "You and I both know I gave you some modicum of my power that night. My ability to speak Parseltongue, amongst other things. But I have answered your question and, truly, I was pleased to do so - for now you understand the futility of opposing Lord Voldemort." He swung the gate open, his black robes a stark contrast to the summer afternoon, his departing figure an inky silhouette staining the landscape.

"Wait!" Harry cried, attempting to follow. But his legs didn't seem to want to move, and his sluggish pace out of the garden did not match that of the receding form the Dark Lord, which grew smaller and smaller as he disappeared on the horizon.

And then Harry was left alone, the trees buzzing with summer, the sky growing darker with the setting sun. He was trapped inside Voldemort's mind; he had no control over what happened here, couldn't even bring himself to wake up. Panic roiled in his stomach, crescendoing to a steady pounding in his ears as the sky continued to darken, as he took in the eerie, lifeless landscape of Voldemort's mind.

He was trapped.

The sky grew darker, the air hotter. The sun was not setting, Harry realized: it had simply vanished altogether, the sky instead cast with an eerie, purple-orange glow. It was very different from the cold, thunderous storm of Voldemort's anger - instead of tearing itself apart, the world seemed to be melting, the temperature increasing steadily with each passing second. He squinted in the distance, trying to make out the retreating silhouette of the Dark Lord, but he had vanished, a spot of black that had blended into the sky like a dripping

watercolour.

A loud, terrible scream rang out from behind him, and Harry whirled around, his heart pounding furiously. It was a woman, a familiar woman, one whom he had heard crying out many times before. A *nightmare*, Harry thought, trying to keep himself calm, his breath coming very fast now. *It's only a nightmare. I'll wake up any second, I will -*

"Harry!" the woman shrieked. "Harry, Harry, *please*, not Harry -"

His mother. The woman was his mother.

Without pausing to give the urge any thought, Harry sprinted across the garden, trampling the flowers, wilting, wilting in the heat. "Harry, no, *please!*" A sweat broke out on his brow by the time he reached the door to the shack, the corpse of the serpent staring with empty eyes in Harry's face, and he threw open the door without any hesitation.

The screaming stopped abruptly. The room was still, and dark, so dark. How was there no light from the windows? His breath caught in his throat, trepidation seizing every cell in his body - and yet, against his better judgement, he slowly lifted his foot and took a single step into the room.

The darkness came alive, then, shadows and black buzzing like a hundred thousand flies - no, not flies, but black, evil creatures of the dark, thousands of them, rolling together in some sort of terrible, writhing, buzzing wave. He was too late, Harry realized. It was a trap, and they were going to consume him.

With a terrified shout, he leapt back and slammed the door, the dead serpent flying off of its precarious position on the door from the force of it - but it didn't keep them in, the windows were shattering in great bursts of glass, and they were rolling out, coming for him, hungry for him -

Harry turned around and ran for his life. The ground was boiling now, the earth bubbling over like the insides of a volcano, heat closing in from above and below and around. The sky was the colour of blood and overripe plums, black clouds streaking the heavens. He burst through the garden gate noisily, feeling the pressure of the shadows against him, the heat pressing in on him from all sides. It was so difficult to run - the churning earth was rising up to swallow him, now, and he was thrashing and drowning and struggling - but it was no use, they were growing closer, and he was going to die in this heat,

this human oven - and *oh*, his scar was on fire, his whole body was being torn apart -

And then, just like that, it was over. He dared not open his eyes, but the temperature had dropped, the boiling heat of the earth had subsided, and he was only floating, bathed in cool, sweet darkness. He was being put back together again, from the inside out: cool, expert fingers arranging him so that he was a walking, talking boy once more. There were red eyes, kind and smiling, and soft fingers, and a gentle, hissing voice, whispering things that Harry didn't understand.

Harry did not remember anything else for a very long time.

Lord Voldemort smiled viciously to himself, closing the confines of his mind as he ascended into waking, trapping the boy in his dream a little longer; mentally walling up the valley of Little Hangleton around Potter. If the child had indeed read *Dream Warrior*, he would have known the dangers to straying into the mind of a Master of Legilimency and Occlumency. Potter would sleep as soundly as the baby he had been for a few hours yet.

Voldemort opened his eyes and blinked into the blurry darkness. The bed was warm and - for a moment - he was lost in that comfort, coiling further under the duvet. But he could not afford to waste time and, reluctantly, he reached an arm out of the luxurious warmth, fingers searching for Potter's spectacles.

At last his hand landed on smooth glass and wiry metal and Voldemort carefully put them on, unused to this world of smudged shadows. If he were the boy, he would have made an effort to discover a magical means of correcting such a weakness rather than relying upon such a vulnerable aid.

The Gryffindor dormitory swam into abrupt clarity. Moonlight streaking in over darkened red and gold. It was not yet dawn. The red-haired boy in the next bed was snoring obnoxiously. Voldemort drew Potter's wand out from under his pillow and closed the bed-curtains, casting a silencing spell as he did so.

None of the sleeping Gryffindors heard Potter's voice begin to incant spells far beyond their simple minds - magic of Lord Voldemort's own devising. He bound the piece of striving soul to the boy, closing the agony of its wound by ever-fixing it in Potter's skin. Magic flew from his mouth as he clothed this flesh in the same protections as his lovely Nagini, warding Potter irrevocably against all harm but that inflicted

by Voldemort himself.

He gasped and trembled at channelling his vast power through the boy's skull, collapsing against the sheets, exhausted by the effort. Potter would not know what was happening, but he would feel a shift as great as this, even while still trapped within a dream.

The Dark Lord closed Potter's eyes, tired beyond measure, and retreated to his own body and his own dawn. *Harry Potter was his Horcrux*. Long, spidery hands rubbed at red eyes, claw-like nails near breaking the shadows beneath them. Voldemort let out a shriek of thwarted fury. Emotion had been held at bay for so long after the worst of the nightmare. He'd done what was necessary, his fear driving him to push aside everything else - still half hypnotised by the surreality of dreaming. But now he was fully awake and enraged because he couldn't stand the feelings pulsing in his blood: fear, desire, horror, possession, and shame. Fear for his Horcruxes and of the madness spinning in his head. Horror at the prophecy which had spurred him on and at the despised child who was now one of his precious treasures. And fierce, possessive desire battling with the shame of all this weakness...

The great snake moved slowly, its darkly green body unspooling as it slithered closer. Lord Voldemort stretched out a pale hand, stroking the scales just above the unblinking amber gaze. She had done her duty and guarded him while he slept. But he had no voice to thank his beautiful pet, nor inform her that she could rest now. His sharp shoulders shook and Voldemort let out another cry of fury, causing Nagini to pull away from him, her bulk sliding off the sheets and onto the floor. The Dark Lord stood, his emaciated nakedness almost blue in the dim light of the shrouded room. He stalked over to the nearest window, rolling his wand between the lengthy digits of his left hand and ripped the curtains aside with the other.

Bright sunlight dazzled in, illuminating the forest of blue-purple veins tangled under his pallid, near-translucent flesh and the scarlet eyes blinking pinkly against the morning; slit, night-hunting pupils receding to the thinnest of lines. A nocturnal creature venturing out of its element, blank-faced and seemingly without feeling. Motes of dust caught the light around him as he opened the window to his shuttered rooms.

Voldemort leapt. Magic spun around him like smoke on the air, clothing him in silken darkness and -

(the world twisted, contracting to red pin-pricks spiralling through the void to release)

- as pale feet landed soundlessly outside the ruin of the Gaunt shack, fearful unease flickering inside him. His diary had been destroyed. Potter's ignorance was no reflection of anything Dumbledore might know or suspect. Of course it was Dumbledore at the root of all this, Dumbledore who had always suspected him. Now Voldemort knew the man was looking for them. But what if... *what if he was too late?* Had the headmaster already acted, had he traced more of them? A very old, sickening fear rose within him: *a burning wardrobe, a suspicious glance when all the other teachers were congratulating him...*

No, no - *it was ludicrous* - the ring was safe, *it must be*. He, Lord Voldemort, would have felt it had any of his treasures been harmed. True, he had not felt the destruction of the diary, but that was because he'd been disembodied and far away. This... this was a mere precaution. And Voldemort swung the old, creaking door open. The nail was still there, almost lonely, bare without its corpse.

He knew as soon as he stepped inside, the rotting floorboards ripped apart at his feet, his spells broken and in disarray. His mind swimming numbly through mounting hysteria, he stared at the disinterred golden box, lying open and empty beside the hole. Through the haze of rage, Voldemort could feel the prickle of Albus Dumbledore's magic - the signature as gaudy as the man himself. *No... no, no, no!* This was worse than any nightmare. Tears of rage streaked down the flat face as acrid reality shot through Voldemort's terrified heart.

The hallways of Hogwarts were emptier than usual, even for a Sunday afternoon, but a quick glance out the window proved that the student population was taking advantage of the unnaturally warm autumn weather outside the castle. Ron talked as they went, catching Harry up on the trivial things he had missed whilst sleeping: Peeves nailing the Slytherins in the face with water balloons at breakfast - "the only time I've ever liked the conniving bastard" - Hagrid was asking them to tea at his cabin next weekend, another bickering match between him and Hermione. Harry began to zone out at this last bit, his thoughts wandering to the strange happenings that had so far surrounded his morning - or rather, afternoon.

Harry rarely slept late. He wasn't an early-early riser like Hermione, but he certainly never slept as late as Seamus, who would remain in bed far after the rest of the dorm had risen and dressed, and never had

he slept into the mid-afternoon. And he had forgotten to take his glasses off before falling asleep! Even after his most exhausting adventures - battling the Hungarian Horntail, or duelling with Death Eaters in the Ministry of Magic - Harry had never forgotten to remove his spectacles before closing his eyes. It was a method of self-preservation that had been carried over from his childhood: his aunt and uncle would never repair or replace his beaten glasses, even when Dudley would snap them in two, and with vision as poor as his, Harry could not afford to go without them. He had learned from a very young age to take good care of them; he refused to shut the light in his cupboard until they were sitting on the shelf above his pillow.

And, what was even worse, he felt as though he were forgetting something of much greater significance than a bedtime ritual. Something had happened last night, something very important, and Harry couldn't for the life of him put his finger on exactly what it was.

It did not take very long for him to find out.

"... can't *stand* her, sometimes I wonder why I even bother, especially when she's just going to snap at me like that!"

Harry made a noncommittal noise - he hated getting in the middle of their arguments - as they reached the entrance hall, which was just as empty as the rest of the castle. They approached the portrait depicting the giant bowl of fruit. Ron was still in the middle of his rant about Hermione's insufferable nagging, so Harry decided that he would do the honours. Raising his arm, he reached forward and went to brush his fingers against the bright green pear -

- and instead found himself looking at an old, rotted door, *so familiar*, yet older and more decrepit than he had remembered it. He watched passively as he opened it, stepped inside the dark room. A detached fury rose inside of him at the sight of an empty, golden box - except that it wasn't him, was it? It was Voldemort, and Harry had never remembered making that distinction before. Harry watched in dull shock as the Dark Lord raged and shouted - he was so angry, and there was so much *loss* - but Harry was only watching. He wasn't overwhelmed by the emotions, he wasn't thrown in the middle of Lord Voldemort's agony: he was only observing.

What was more, he knew that, if he wanted to, he could *stop* watching as well. Deciding to give it a shot, Harry closed his eyes and returned back to his own body, easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy, with barely any effort. And his scar - it *didn't hurt*. He wasn't rolling around the floor,

panting and sweating and clutching at his forehead like a raving lunatic. He was perfectly okay, not any worse for the wear, completely unaffected.

"Harry," Ron said, sounding quite offended. "I don't think you're listening to me."

And suddenly, it all came back to him, in a rush of memories and emotions and fear that really *did* overwhelm him. There was a reason that the shack had looked familiar - he had been there twice, just the night before, once in a Pensieve and once in a dream. Voldemort had returned there today, had been looking for something as a result of it all - and he had found it missing. Perhaps it had been that locket, Harry thought, his stomach flipping over. Perhaps it had been a piece of his soul.

Harry looked at Ron, his heart pounding. "We need to go see the headmaster."

Broken pieces of rotted wood lay scattered across the tall grass. The debris and detritus of the old shack had been blasted to pieces. In the clearing, Lord Voldemort stood, scarlet eyes livid - his ophidian nostrils flaring. If the walls of the hovel had been men, he would have shattered them as unthinkingly as plaster and wood - lashing out at everything around him; a furious, white-faced demon at the centre of a crater of his own making.

Then the air around Voldemort curved, swirling black robes blurred -
(the sky raced toward him into twisting abyss)

- and sea spray hit his face and hands as the Dark Lord sped on the wind above the crests of roiling grey waves. Voldemort glided smoothly to an outcrop of rock beneath the cliff, the agitated ocean washing carelessly around him.

He half-ran half-flew through the grim fissure, down into the black-slimed darkness of the damp, saline tunnel beyond. The high cavern awaited him, glimmering wetly under the sharp light of his wand. It allowed Lord Voldemort passage with a flick of his wrist - the aura of his long-ago magic welcoming his return. No one had come this way - none had disturbed Slytherin's locket.

But... better to be sure...

The great, black lake was utterly still - shining with the light of the basin that reflected in the vast, watery mirror like the light of some verdant moon. The silence calmed Voldemort, though it did not soften his rage. Cold fury had settled in upon him and it was with a terse movement of the yew wand that he summoned the ghostly coracle from beneath the water, causing it to rise, dripping with the rancid swill of Inferi.

His bare feet slid against the slippery, filthy bottom of the boat, but Lord Voldemort did not care. He breathed in the stench of salt, seaweed, and necrosis, uncaring. The dead teemed beneath the boat - their limbs thick and dense, almost squeezed under the glassy surface of the lake - but Voldemort had eyes only for the island of dark, flat stone and the pedestal where Slytherin's Locket should lie safe in its shining, poisonous broth.

And - yes, yes, yes - it was there, it was safe. Voldemort carefully drew it out from the green glow with his wand. It dangled in the air, emeralds sparkling. A chasm opened up inside his stomach as he stared at a perfect simulacrum of his treasure, as void of soul as the locket in his dream:

To the Dark Lord,

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B

The shriek echoed across the lake, agitating the corpses, making them shift and claw each other. Magic flared and a fuming lash of power brought forth a desiccated body from its surface. Regulus Black... A weak-willed fool, a thief, a coward... a traitor. "Tell me, Black..." Voldemort hissed at the Inferius suspended along with the false Horcrux. "Where is my locket?"

The rotted lips parted, the body over-swelled and leaking. The Inferius gurgled. A pathetic, bubbly groan. Nothing of Black remained, only this putrid shell. But it obeyed its Master. Dumbly, its finger reached out and spelt the answer on the air with all the dreadful compulsion of ritual. Greedily, Voldemort watched, fear and hope and fury racing in his chest - pulse pounding in his temples. The livid eyes were wide

and eager, the gash of a mouth vicious and hateful in the darkness.

K-R-E-A-C-H-E-R

And who, or what, Kreacher was - Lord Voldemort had no idea.

Seven flights of staircases lay between Harry and the headmaster's office, but Harry took them two steps at a time, Ron panting at his heels.

"Harry," Ron called from behind him as they paused at the landing of the seventh floor to take a breath, "Harry, what the hell is the matter with you?" Harry did not pause to listen, only long enough to calm his breathing and his pounding heart, before he set off down the corridor in the direction of Dumbledore's office. He turned left and nearly barrelled into a familiar load of bushy brown hair.

"There you are!" said Hermione, her hands on her hips and a disapproving frown on her face. "I've been looking all *over* for you two," and here, she sent an icy look in Ron's direction, who was just as quick to return it. "I've been down at the library and - "

"There's no time, Hermione," Harry said breathlessly, and pushed past her, ignoring the indignant sound she made at being shoved aside. "I need to see Dumbledore straight away." And he continued stalking down the hallway, not bothering to look behind him to see if they were following. This was beyond urgent - this could put Dumbledore's life in danger, for all he knew - if only he had remembered the dream just a few moments earlier -

"Perhaps he saw something," Hermione suggested in a hushed voice from behind him, their footsteps not a step behind his own as they hurried to keep up. She had apparently forgiven or forgotten her earlier gripe with Ron. "Was he clutching at his scar?"

Right turn, past the statue of Lachlan the Lanky.

"No, no - he didn't even bat an eyelash!" Ron replied, sounding exasperated and very out of breath. "One minute he was going to let us in to the kitchens, and the next he's raving about seeing Dumbledore! Won't even stop to tell me what's wrong!"

This last bit did give Harry a moment to pause, but only to again contemplate how strange it was that his scar hadn't even given him the vaguest prickle of irritation. It felt as calm and happy as it did on

days when he was able to nearly forget Voldemort's existence - never mind days that he was treated to entire visions of Voldemort's terrified rage. And he had been able to extract himself from Voldemort's mind before as easily as he might have slipped from a pleasant daydream.

Had he somehow mastered his connection with Voldemort's mind in his sleep? Could this mean - Harry swallowed - that he could slip in and out of the Dark Lord's consciousness as well?

Harry gave a hesitant, experimental prod at Voldemort's thoughts - that space in his mind from which he had so easily escaped in front of the kitchens' entrance. He called up the Dark Lord's surroundings as effortlessly as a familiar memory. A dark, musty cave replaced the seventh floor corridor, and a terrible, stinking monster - *a corpse, oh god, it was a corpse* - filled his vision, standing only feet in front of him, green water spilling out of its mouth, its eyes. Stomach turning, Harry watched with horror as the carcass raised a bloated, rotten finger, began to spell out a word in the air: *Kreacher*.

He stood in the middle of the lake, lost in thought, his waxen skin turned sickly green by the light of the basin. He did not spare a glance at the corpse and the locket, both suspended, turning idly in the air beside him. In the unnatural stillness, he forced himself to think. Harry - Voldemort - prowled the water's edge, trying to recall the word the Inferius had given. *Kreacher*. Was it a place, a name, a spell?

He paced the circumference of the tiny island, tasting the word on his forked tongue. It seemed to hover, just out of reach, taunting him: *Kreacher, Kreacher...* There was a terrible roar and the Inferius cried as only the dead can cry: wretched groans as searing, vindictive flames billowed from his wand, immolating the corpse of Regulus Arcturus Black.

Unable to stand the stench any longer, Harry threw himself back into the hall and nearly lost the little contents of his stomach right then and there.

"Harry?" Hermione said softly, voice shaking; her hand was resting gently on his arm. Harry realized that he had stopped walking.

"Kreacher," Harry croaked, ignoring the confused, wary looks on his friends' faces. He was trembling. Kreacher was at Hogwarts, working in the kitchens. Kreacher, since Sirius' death, belonged to Harry.

It seemed as though Harry would be encountering the Dark Lord a lot sooner than he had expected.

Voldemort watched as the corpse began to crisp and blacken. There was still a chance. He had not sensed any of his old Transfiguration professor's magic. The charms he layered upon his Horcruxes were exhaustive. It was possible that Black's accomplice had been unable to destroy it. Fire danced in his red eyes as the Dark Lord cast his mind back to when he had first hidden his heirloom in this cave. He had required a House-Elf from one of his Death Eaters, to test the efficacy of the potion. A worthless, mewling, cretinous creature...

Kreacher! *That was it!* It had been *Black* who had volunteered his elf! He remembered the runty thing, crying and begging for its mistress as he left it to die with the secret of the cave. Scattering the charred remains of its former master, Voldemort summoned the little body with an elegant swish of his wand.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, more forcefully, causing the other Inferi to half rise from the water, murmuring, hypnotised by the pull of his magic.

There was only one conclusion he could draw. Somehow, despite every precaution, the loathsome thing had escaped and carried the knowledge of Lord Voldemort's treasure back to its treacherous owner. Very well. Assuming the elf was still alive, it would have passed to Sirius Black upon the deaths of Orion and Walburga, and he had been felled at the Ministry scant months ago. This meant that, legally, the elf was the property of the eldest Black cousin: Bellatrix Lestrange. Only, *only*... he remembered Rodolphus and Bellatrix complaining that the will had violated pure-blood custom and everything had passed to... Harry Potter.

Potter. Why must everything always come back to Potter? But Potter didn't know about his Horcruxes until last night. Perhaps the elf had merely hidden it away; simple, animal intelligence unable to recognise the locket's true value? But now Potter was *his* creature and the mind which held the elf's location was ripe for plucking.

And, as Voldemort stepped from the boat onto the rocky shore, and slipped from the cave - a streak of dark ribbon rushing headlong over the swell of the incoming tide, toward the daylight at the end of the jagged, black tunnel - he closed his eyes and sank effortlessly into Potter's thoughts. As deft and feather-light as the black shadow flying high above the sea...

"I had another dream."

Dumbledore looked up from his desk, where he sat with a quill in his good hand. He surveyed the three wheezing teenagers through his half-moon spectacles, his eyebrows raised, laying his quill on the desktop, and rose to his feet. "Someone is hurt?"

"No - not yet, sir, but - but someone's in danger - we all are," said Harry breathlessly. His cheeks were pink with shortness of breath and shame. "He knows, he fooled me, and he knows about his soul - the pieces of it, that you want to destroy them -"

"Pieces?" Dumbledore repeated softly. He shook his head. "Oh dear. Just as I suspected. Sit down, Harry, have an Acid Pop." He looked over Harry's shoulder, noticing Ron and Hermione standing there for the first time. "Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley, good day to you - you may both have a seat as well." A wave of his wand, and three armchairs appeared on their side of the desk; Dumbledore set about to arranging various sweets for their consumption.

"Acid Pops?" Harry repeated, still panting. Ron and Hermione sat down uncomfortably on either side of him. "But - sir, with all due respect, this is rather important -"

"It is of grave importance, I am well aware," Dumbledore said, settling himself behind his desk again, "but if you would indulge me for just a moment, Harry, it would please me very much if you were to have an acid pop." The bowl of candies floated toward him; Harry didn't notice Ron staring at them with wide eyes. Frustrated, Harry grabbed one, unwrapped it, and popped it in his mouth.

"Can I speak now?" Harry said around the candy after a few moments. Ron was practically gaping at him now, and Dumbledore was studying him carefully.

"Your tongue," Ron said, unable to hide his surprise. "Your tongue is still in one piece, Harry!"

"Indeed, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore, steepling his fingers and continuing to examine Harry carefully, "but we can explore that particular curiosity in a few minutes. Who is in danger, Harry, and how immediate is the situation?"

It took Harry a few moment to answer this question; he had torn the Acid Pop from his mouth at Ron's enlightening exclamation and was now looking at it very strangely, recalling what Ron had told him

once about how these particular lollipops could burn a hole straight through a person's tongue. "Kreacher," he said after a moment, looking back at the Headmaster; he placed the candy very carefully on his leg. "Voldemort was in a cave, just now - he's angry, something is missing, and it has something to do with Kreacher."

Dumbledore frowned, but it was clear from his eyes that he had made a connection from this disjointed explanation that Harry had not. Raising his wand, he flicked it at the space next to the desk; there was a loud *crack*, and the house-elf in question appeared, big ears flopping and a very sour expression on his face. He grimaced when he caught sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione sitting there.

"Kreacher appears to be safe and sound," said Dumbledore. He leaned forward, looking the ugly creature in the eye. "Would you mind answering some questions for us, Kreacher?"

"Kreacher doesn't have to answer to you - blood-traitor, Mudblood-lover, disgrace to the ancient school and Salazar Slytherin - "

"Kreacher!" Harry snapped irritably. The house-elf shut up in an instant; Hermione treated Harry to a very frosty glare. "Answer the headmaster's questions, and be polite. Please," he added through gritted teeth as Hermione's expression became threatening.

And, rather begrudgingly, the house-elf obeyed.

Lord Voldemort stood in the shade of an ancient oak tree, staring at the gate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Invisible, the Dark Lord admired the pillars of the great gate, topped with Hogwarts' heraldic winged boars. The iron gates had been chained shut. He contemplated the wards, shutting his eyes and feeling their power emanating outwards. Voldemort could sense the old magic of Hogwarts, deep below the grass and, atop it, layer upon layer of newly cast protective spellwork. Enough Anti-intruder jinxes to repel an army.

But Voldemort knew that. He knew that the Aurors stationed at Hogsmeade were Savage, Tonks, Proudfoot and Dawlish. Just as he knew that they were about to be called away on urgent Ministry business as, with any luck, would the majority of the Order of the Phoenix.

It was a golden autumn Sunday. Much of the fear that had been attached to venturing out in the wake of the news of Voldemort's

return had dissipated. And in Diagon Alley witches, wizards and their progeny would be out shopping and enjoying the last of the warm weather. The Dark Lord had intended to spend most of this year consolidating his influence and rebuilding his forces. However, he felt confident - even at such an early stage of preparedness - in his ability to outmanoeuvre Albus Dumbledore. Voldemort had given his Death Eaters strict instructions: *do not endanger yourselves with heroics, use the Imperius Curse rather than Avada Kedavra to allow your victims to spread chaos for you, and take as many of them alive as you can.*

Potter's mind had told him that it was too late to attempt taking the elf. If the locket was to be found, it would be by Dumbledore. The Headmaster was busy even now interrogating the little cockroach. But Voldemort didn't need to locate his Horcrux himself. All he needed to do was be in a position to force Dumbledore to give it to him.

A great silvery cat streaked across the grass toward the drab-haired Metamorphmagus stationed at the gate. The Auror listened with rapt attention to the deep-voiced murmur of the Patronus, before disappearing with an inelegant *crack*. Voldemort waited a few minutes and then glided invisibly, almost lazily, toward the gate.

He had always been fascinated by warding magic, even at school. Such complex towers of incantation, usually built on such shaky foundations. The wards of Hogwarts were tripartite. Firstly, there were enchantments which recognised trespassers, alerting the staff should any magician enter without authorisation. Then there were the wards which barred entry. Those were the most recent spells, added in the last few years or left over from the previous war. The final level was the old magic of the earth - as old as Hogwarts itself - keyed off intention. One could not enter intending to harm the school or its students.

Lord Voldemort flickered into being for a few moments and then his body narrowed and lengthened, collapsing into the grass and writhing into another form entirely. The snake slipped noiselessly through the iron bars of the gate, beneath the watchful eyes of the bronze boars. *I am the Heir of Slytherin, the serpent voiced to the ancient magic above and beneath it. This is my place, my home... and I seek only what is mine to protect...*

And Hogwarts allowed the snake passage.

A heavy silence filled the room when Kreacher finished the last words

of his tale. There were shining tracks of tears down his leathery, wrinkled face, his over-large ears quivering. Hermione looked ready to cry herself, and even Harry, who detested Kreacher, found himself affected. Fresh hatred filled up inside him; he could all too easily imagine the cruel smirk twisting Voldemort's thin lips as he left the house-elf dying on the island, and, later, the house-elf sobbing, forced to watch as the Inferi rose from the water to seize his master's body.

Dumbledore was the first to speak. He did not look nearly as disturbed as the three teenagers sitting before him; rather, he was fixing Kreacher with an intense stare, leaning forward in his chair with his fingers still steepled beneath his chin. "And do you have any knowledge of the locket's current whereabouts, Kreacher?"

Kreacher gave the headmaster a watery glare. "The locket is Kreacher's; Master Regulus said so, said that Kreacher was not to show it to mistress or to - "

"Kreacher," Harry said, but his voice had lost its bite. "Please, just answer the headmaster's question. It's very important."

The house-elf's mouth began to tremble as badly as his ears. His shrivelled lips opened to speak - but thoughts of Kreacher and the locket briefly fled from Harry's mind when a blinding bright light flashed through the window. For a terrible moment, Harry thought that they were being attacked; and then he saw that the light had taken the form of an animal, some kind of mountain cat - a Patronus.

The glowing lynx halted between the students and the headmaster, turning slowly to face Dumbledore. "Chaos in Diagon Alley," Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice resonated through the room. "They're taking hostages. Come as soon as possible. Bring as much help as is convenient." And with those ominous words, the Patronus dissolved into thin air.

The headmaster's office fell into silence once more. Harry's heart was pounding; an attack on Diagon Alley? The day after Harry had let slip to the Dark Lord that they were hunting pieces of his soul? Not an hour after Voldemort had discovered that Dumbledore apparently was well on his way in this venture? He caught Dumbledore's eye and knew that his professor had come to the same conclusion. Mouth set in a thin line, Dumbledore kept Harry's gaze and nodded toward the house-elf, who still stood beside the desk, shaking and uncertain.

"Kreacher, go home," Harry said at once. "You're not to leave

Grimmauld Place. Stay out of sight."

With one last hateful glare, the house-elf raised its hand, snapped two of its fingers, and vanished.

Dumbledore stood up slowly, his gaze drawn to the window in through which the Patronus had glided. He looked deeply troubled. Harry wished desperately that he were a Legilimens so that he could peer into his professor's thoughts, learn of the terrible conclusions that the brilliant mind behind those piercing blue eyes was currently drawing. Instead, the boy saviour could only sit there silently, left confused and in the dark.

At last, Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh and turned toward the three teenagers. "Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, if you could please rally the other prefects and escort all students directly to their respective House common rooms immediately."

Hermione, ever eager to follow directions, leapt immediately to her feet. She seized Ron's sleeve - the red-head was still sitting in his chair, gaping back and forth from Harry to Dumbledore - and pulled him out of his seat as well.

"Are my parents alright?" Ron asked Harry suddenly. He looked as though he had been waiting to ask this question since Harry had begun sprinting up the stairs to the headmaster's office. Perhaps he had; Harry had not been paying attention. "My brothers, too - you didn't see them hurt or anything, did you?"

"No," Harry said. His voice sounded very far away. "They're fine."

"Come *on*, Ron," said Hermione, and she began to drag him toward the door. Harry made to follow them as well, but Dumbledore halted him with one pointed glance.

"One moment, Harry."

Hermione gave him a sympathetic glance, and then the door thudded shut behind them, leaving Harry and Dumbledore alone. The headmaster sighed again very heavily, crossing back to the window, gazing out at the Quidditch pitch. Silence settled uncomfortably between them again, and, after a few long minutes, Harry began to wonder if Dumbledore had forgotten that he was there.

"Professor, you don't think," Harry began, but his mouth was very dry. He cleared his throat and tried again. "You don't think that Voldemort

would come ... *here*, to Hogwarts, do you?"

Dumbledore's lips thinned. He suddenly looked very old in the autumn sunlight, his face a map of wrinkles, his beard very white. "Yes, Harry," he replied. "I believe that that's exactly what he intends to do."

And, as Harry tried to calm his runaway pulse, tried to hold his wand in fingers that didn't tremble as badly as the pitiful house-elf describing the day that the Dark Lord nearly killed him, there was a knock on the door.

But it was only Slughorn who came bursting into the office, looking quite disgruntled but very far from the glowing red eyes in Harry's nightmare. His already ample bulk swelled and his nose was turned upward above his bristling, walrus moustache - as though scenting intrigue.

"What in Merlin's name is going on, Albus?" Slughorn seemed almost like one of those reptiles who, when disturbed, puff themselves up in order to appear more threatening than they truly are. "Mr Weasley near flattened us running down the stairs and Ms Granger was full of all sorts of nonsense about an emergency!"

"I believe I shall be able to shed some light upon the matter, professor." A tall figure stepped gracefully through the door from behind Slughorn.

Lord Voldemort unfurled into the room, his tenebrous aura lengthening like a shadow. All of the breath left Harry's lungs in a rush. The Dark Lord was wearing another face - just as he had in Harry's dream, a plain, too-human disguise that seemed so inappropriate for the monster that he knew was lurking beneath.

"Oh yes," Slughorn bumbled, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. *Of course* it would have been *Slughorn* to lead Voldemort right into Dumbledore's office! Harry might have been furious with the man, but the only thing he could conjure was fear, cold and consuming, turning his blood to ice in his veins. "May I introduce-?"

"There is no wizard in Europe who has not heard of the great Albus Dumbledore," The icy tone cut Slughorn's speech like a knife slicing through butter. Voldemort's eerily mellifluous voice seemed to take up more space than its volume, filling the office like an electrical current. Although his expression remained polite, there was something contorted and derisive rippling beneath the pale skin which stretched slowly into a taut, evil smile. "And, as he seems to take particular

pleasure in remembering my name, I will wager he has not forgotten it."

"Forgive my nostalgia, Tom, but I'm an old man," said Dumbledore, and to Harry's surprise, the professor gave the Dark Lord a small, sad smile. "I shall always see the eager first year in your face, no matter how badly you disfigure it."

Harry's eyes darted with shock and nervous fear from the Headmaster to the Dark Lord to Slughorn, whose face had drained completely of colour at this revelation. Dumbledore was acting as though Lord Voldemort waltzed into his office every other day, seeking Dark Lord advice from Hogwarts' wizened old headmaster on a weekly basis. How could he speak so easily to the most dangerous wizard of their time?

"Albus - *really!*" Slughorn blustered, finding his voice, hands flapping helplessly. "Merlin help us - you've gone off the deep end! This isn't *him*, it's-" And then the mask slipped away from Voldemort's features, melting like heated wax, and the potions professor's words terminated with a horrified squeak.

The hairs rippled on the back of Harry's neck as Voldemort swept into the armchair directly beside him, only a few feet away. The Dark Lord's magical energy prickled the air at this proximity, no longer dulled by the fog of dream and nightmare. For all of the attention that Voldemort was paying Harry, however, they might not have seen each other since the debacle at the Ministry last summer. There was no hint of recollection in the slitted, scarlet eyes of their nonchalant conversation the evening before, nor of - he tried not to shudder - that strange, embarrassing embrace.

"My apologies, Headmaster," Voldemort said softly. "For not owling you in advance and..." he spared the boy next to him little more than a contemptuous sideways glance, "interrupting your *class*." The smile widened, showing the lascivious forked tongue and sharp, white teeth. Glittering eyes took in Dumbledore's luxurious orange and silver robes. Voldemort had the air of a deadly predator kept at bay only by some private amusement. He was *enjoying* this. "But I hardly think I am alone in my weakness for the dramatic."

Dumbledore seated himself behind his desk, following suit, a bizarre chess game of sorts. "Ah, but I was under the impression that the great Lord Voldemort had little time for such foolish extravagance," Dumbledore mused. "But I suppose that, much like one's true name,

some things never change." Another sad smile. He almost looked like he was ... *pitying* Voldemort, leaning backward in his high-backed chair, hand folded in front of him, studying the Dark Lord like some sort of enigmatic puzzle. "I somehow doubt that you've wandered into Hogwarts this afternoon to criticize my partiality for dramatic flair, Tom. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

The air became colder still and Voldemort's voice was arctic as his eyes burned. His flat, serpentine face was closed - expressionless - as though holding off on the brink of murderous rage, kept at bay only by the most ruthless self-control. "You know why I have come, Dumbledore." The crimson gaze lingered for a moment on the Headmaster's withered, blackened hand. "And I have no doubt that one of your pet Aurors has already informed you of the consequences should you refuse me. I have come for what is *mine*."

A violent shiver raced down Harry's spine, and Voldemort turned his eyes to meet Harry's for the first time since he had entered the office. Death and horror lay in those eyes, the torture and bloodshed of so many people, so many faces. Harry saw them, each and every one; saw their mouths contorting and their bodies writhing and their families weeping. So much avoidable, unnecessary carnage and it was in *Harry's hands*, Harry's house-elf, to stop it.

The boy rose to his feet in a heartbeat, his fists clenched hard to stop the trembling. No one would die because of him. But before he could open his mouth, Dumbledore raised his hand - the one that wasn't shrivelled up and rotted with disease - and silenced Harry with a weighty look.

"Sit down, Harry," Dumbledore said firmly, that casual, cheery civility completely gone from his voice. Harry opened his mouth to protest, but the headmaster's gaze hardened further, and Harry lowered himself slowly to his seat. Kreacher was only a single word away, Harry reminded himself. If things got too nasty, Harry could always summon the house-elf to return the damn locket to the Dark Lord. Even so, the slow beginnings of fear and uncertainty coiled in long, icy tendrils around his stomach. Dumbledore wouldn't sacrifice lives for this crazy battle of wills, would he?

"And what of that which was not yours to take in the first place?" Dumbledore levelled a cool glare at Voldemort. "You always did have a nasty habit of appropriating the other children's belongings for your own cruel uses, Tom. I did not endorse such behaviour in your schooldays; do you truly expect that I've changed in my old age?"

"Ah yes..." there was almost a sigh in Lord Voldemort's words, "The five minutes you devoted to my moral education by terrifying a child. You flatter yourself, Dumbledore." The ruby gaze became wide, shining with a horrible, mercurial immaturity that could almost pass itself off as innocence. Almost. "I have told you what I have come for, Headmaster, and I do not care to repeat myself. The locket. Or shall I signal my servants to begin?"

Harry stared dumbly at the Dark Lord, uncomprehending. Voldemort was discussing the massacre of dozens of people like he might simply be calling Wormtail in to fetch a kettle of tea. It was revolting. And Dumbledore - Dumbledore was just sitting there, his expression unreadable, eyes twinkling in a way that did not seem nearly as congenial as it had been when Harry was eleven. Merlin, he was actually sitting there, weighing his options - weighing the lives of dozens of innocents like so many Knuts and Sickles, as though their senseless deaths even could *be* a viable option in this negotiation. Harry's stomach turned again at the thought of it: how many mutilated, bloody corpses must be piled onto the headmaster's golden scale before it tipped over?

"No," Harry said without thinking. He rose to his feet, his heart racing; Dumbledore raised a warning hand as he had before, but Harry ignored it. The hands and words of these two men might hold the world together, but they wouldn't stop Harry if he could help it.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, his voice low and warning.

"I won't let you," Harry snapped right over him, and he turned to look at the Dark Lord. He was hardly able to stop himself from trembling, his nails biting into the skin of his palms, his right hand curled so tightly around his wand he thought it might leave impressions when he finally released it. "You must promise not to hurt him," he told Voldemort, pleased that his voice caught only slightly as he spoke. "You've already put him through quite enough." He could only imagine the tirade to which Hermione would treat him should he trade Kreacher's life for anything, no matter how important.

Voldemort's gaze flicked impassively from one wizard to the other, clearly revelling in the growing discord between Harry and the Headmaster. "Get me my locket, Harry," he replied silkily, "and Lord Voldemort shall spare as many worthless elves as you deem necessary."

"You'll release all of your prisoners as well," Harry added warily, the

statement almost posed as a question, inflection rising on the last word. It couldn't be that simple. There must be something else that the Dark Lord wanted. "I call Kreacher, he retrieves the locket, and you'll let them go?"

Perhaps it really was that simple. Harry remembered the raw, brutal terror that had swept them both into that mind-shattering nightmare the evening before. He could never recall Voldemort being so frightened before - and it had all stemmed from that one locket, drawn casually from Harry's pocket. His mere knowledge of its existence had thrown Voldemort into a furious panic. And the way that the Dark Lord had held him afterward, mistaking him for that strange, disconnected piece of his soul - if Lord Voldemort, ruthless, monstrous, hateful Lord Voldemort could feel such uncharacteristic affection and kindness for something, anything at all - inspiration, hopeful and dangerous, bloomed slowly within Harry's heart. How far would Voldemort go to ensure the safety of his soul?

This is mad, Harry thought. But wasn't this entire endeavour madness in itself? The assumption that Harry Potter, an inexperienced, ordinary sixteen-year-old save for an absurdly-shaped blemish on his forehead, could take on and bring an end to the greatest Dark wizard in history ... Harry remembered fleeing in terror, defenceless, in a graveyard, remembered cowering behind a statue as his headmaster and Voldemort traded powerful, violent curses in the Ministry atrium. Harry's destiny was leading him straight to his death at the hands of a powerful, sadistic monster, and the wizarding world wouldn't even be any the better off for it.

"But what of the rest of these - these objects?" There was a sort of wildness in his eyes, his posture. He was very aware of Dumbledore's heavy gaze, boring into him from behind his desk, but he didn't care; this was brilliant, it could be the end of all this senseless death, it could mean a new, peaceful age for the wizarding world. "If we swore to stop hunting them - if we returned them all to your safekeeping - what would you give us in return? Would you stop the killing altogether? Would you -"

"Harry, that is *enough*."

Dumbledore had stood up when Harry hadn't noticed. He had never seen the headmaster looking so angry; the air in the office had grown very cold and thick, and Dumbledore's face was dark with fury. Harry saw that his headmaster had drawn his wand, and he realized with a jolt of shock that he wasn't quite sure whether Dumbledore intended

to point it at his enemy or his student. "If you would summon Kreacher, we shall restore the locket to Mr. Riddle and he will be on his way."

The Dark Lord did not even pay Dumbledore the slightest passing glance; rather, he was studying Harry with a fierceness that was uncanny - nearly the same way, Harry recalled, that Voldemort had looked at him in his dreamscape when he'd realized he had been clinging to a boy and not a locket. The intensity of Voldemort's stare sent another ripple of goose bumps crawling across the flesh of Harry's neck and shoulders. Last Harry had checked, however, he had neither been embraced by the serpentine wizard this afternoon, nor had he done anything that might have caused Voldemort to take him for an inanimate object again; he could think of nothing that would warrant him this sort of attention.

"Summon the elf," Voldemort echoed Dumbledore softly, his high voice nearly a whisper. "Restore to me what is mine, and I shall indeed be a merciful lord." And then Voldemort extended his hand, a slow uncurling of long, white fingers. "*You have my word.*"

Harry blinked at the gesture in confusion, half-expecting the Dark Lord to spring up and close those elegant fingers round his neck. But the Dark Lord's hand did not falter nor lunge, and after a few more moments of disbelief, Harry had no other choice but to understand that Lord Voldemort was attempting to *shake his hand*.

"Harry," said Dumbledore again, a reminder of his place, his allegiance. Would Dumbledore shake Voldemort's hand if the Dark Lord offered it to him? But Dumbledore had nearly been ready to offer innocent blood for the sake of this twisted contest between light and dark. Harry was not as much like his headmaster as he had once thought. And besides, Harry knew that there was a deeper magic invoked through physical contact during negotiations such as these. If nothing else, accepting the gesture would at least hold Voldemort to his word.

Swallowing, the boy reached out his own hand, tentative and uncertain, and grasped the Dark Lord's own.

He cringed automatically, expecting a flare of pain to rip his skull in half the way it did whenever he was unfortunate enough to come into physical contact with Voldemort - but there was nothing. No, wait - not nothing; there was certainly *something*, an unfamiliar and not altogether unpleasant stirring in his chest, in the very core of his

being. Harry sucked in his breath, but he couldn't bring himself to let go, so intrigued by this foreign sensation coursing through his body. It was a vague but insistent *tugging*, as though an invisible thread were tied to his heartstrings and ran all the way through his shoulder to his elbow to the very tips of his fingers, and something inside of the Dark Lord had *latched* onto the ends of it and was tugging, tugging, tugging at the centre of Harry's soul -

And then the moment was over as quickly as it had begun. Voldemort had released his hand, and he looked far too pleased for Harry's comfort; perhaps Harry should have simply listened to Dumbledore, who, despite his disturbing lack of reaction to the threat of a massacre in Diagon Alley, always seemed to have Harry's best interests in mind. It occurred to him then that they were waiting on him to fulfil his end of the bargain, and so he cleared his throat, shifting awkwardly to dispel the lingering prickle in his fingers, his arm, and said loudly, "Kreacher, come."

There was a *crack*, followed by a hoarse scream, and Harry found himself with a house-elf barrelling past and then behind him, clinging to the backs of his robes and shaking like a leaf. It took at least a minute of reassurances and coaxing to get Kreacher to calm down enough to speak, and at least several more minutes of stammering and squeaking before Harry realized with a wave of dread that retrieving Voldemort's locket might not prove as simple as he had hoped.

A thief, in Grimmauld Place. A thief, who had taken everything valuable, who had snatched Slytherin's dusty locket from Kreacher's bed. Harry's stomach plummeted through the floor, his hopes falling with it. If Mundungus had truly stolen the locket, then there was no telling who had it now.

"This seems very clear to me." Voldemort's high, sibilant voice was matter-of-fact. "You have the house under the protection of the Fidelius Charm, do you not? So this... Mundungus Fletcher... must be a wizard you trust or, at least, are in a position to command. Have you not merely to order him hence at the behest of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore? Or would you have Lord Voldemort hunt Mr Fletcher himself?" Cold, merciless amusement lurked in the question. Voldemort looked as though he would very much like to hunt and kill a wizard at this moment – it showed clearly in his greedy, angular features. His lipless mouth pulled away from his sharp teeth in an impatient snarl.

"I'm sure Mundungus would be perfectly happy to help us of his own

volition, no hunting necessary," said Dumbledore. Somewhere between Harry's strange handshake with the Dark Lord and the end of Kreacher's speech, the headmaster had returned to his small smiles and pleasantries. But Harry could see that the twinkle was lacking in its conviction every time Dumbledore's gaze fell on his unruly student, who was still kneeling where his trembling house-elf had stood before Harry had sent it happily back to Grimmauld Place. "Horace?"

The man in question was still at the entrance to the headmaster's office, stiff as a board, eyes bulging. Harry had nearly forgotten that his Potions professor was still there; he had gone completely mute as soon as Dumbledore had revealed the true identity of their visitor, and he hadn't spoken a word since. At the call of his name, however, his jowls began to quiver, a small assurance that he hadn't in fact been petrified when they all had been arguing.

"Would you be so kind as to keep Harry and Tom company while I send for Mr. Fletcher?" The mild, casual way Dumbledore posed this question was rather discordant with the sudden panic making Harry's stomach do backflips. "I should only be a few short minutes."

Would Dumbledore really leave them alone together? Across the room, it seemed as though Slughorn were going through a similar crisis; his mouth hung open, and his face was turning a rather unpleasant shade of purple.

"Lovely," Dumbledore said, rubbing his hands together and rising to his feet. "I'll just be a moment, then. There's tea, sweets, crumpets - help yourself." And with that, he grabbed a handful of Floo Powder from the jar beside the hearth, said a name that Harry didn't recognize, and disappeared into the roaring green flames in the fireplace - leaving Harry essentially alone.

Harry stood up uncomfortably, his wand still clutched in his hand, a comforting safety net between his fingers - or at least the illusion of one, because there wasn't much of a safety net when one was locked in a small room with a dragon. Harry glanced hopefully over at Slughorn, but his professor had gone from purple to white in a few seconds flat. It was clear that he would be useless in any sort of duel, especially against a wizard as powerful as the one lounging in his armchair at present. Harry could only hope that the Dark Lord was preoccupied enough with his locket to make an attempt on Harry's life, and that his trust in Dumbledore's good intentions was well-founded.

"I do hope the Headmaster has not decided to do anything too foolish," Voldemort sniffed, the slitted nostrils dilating as he stood with a rustle of black silk. With Dumbledore gone, the Dark Lord's aura engulfed the entire office in its velvety darkness. "But how fortune favours Lord Voldemort! Here I find myself at leisure with two wizards I have been seeking for so long."

He glided over toward Slughorn, his clawed hands outstretched as if to embrace him. The two Slytherins could not have been less alike. Pale, rail-thin Lord Voldemort towered over squat, round Slughorn.

"My *dear* professor," Voldemort greeted Slughorn affably, "you must forgive me for the small trick I played upon you. It really is such a pleasure to see my favourite teacher once more." Milky digits settled on Slughorn's shoulder and Voldemort seemed to relish the horrified shudder that accompanied them. The Dark Lord turned to Potter, crimson eyes bathing the room in malice. "Did you know – Harry – that this *fine* wizard once taught me, just as he is teaching you now? I wonder, Horace, if you invite him to your little parties? If you secretly dream about bending famous Harry Potter over your desk as you once dreamed of brilliant Tom Riddle?"

Heat rushed to Harry's cheeks, and his mouth dangled open wordlessly, unable to form a response. Ron and Seamus had privately teased Harry that Slughorn's obsession with him bordered on infatuation - all those points to Gryffindor during Potions, with the Prince's ample help, of course - but Harry would have never in a million years entertained the notion that Slughorn would actually consider such a thought himself. And the thought of Slughorn, doing ... doing *that*, with Harry - the boy's stomach churned with revulsion at the idea. The other boys in his dorm had often speculated about their teachers' sex lives, but Harry much rather preferred to think of his professors as non-sexual entities. Much as he thought of most of the adults in his life, in fact - Slughorn and Voldemort included.

But it occurred to Harry then that perhaps even Tom Riddle had once had a life that included pleasures beyond the systematic torture and murder of Muggle innocents. Harry's cheeks grew even warmer, and not quite from revulsion, as he thought about the converse of that statement - young, handsome Tom Riddle with his dark hair and light eyes, the boy who had chased Harry in the Chamber of Secrets - dishevelled and bent over a desk and...

Harry decided then that it was probably best to not *ever* think about the adults in his life in sexual situations again, because, Merlin, this

was *Voldemort*, and there were so many different things wrong with this conversation that Harry had lost count.

"I, you," Slughorn was spluttering tremendously. The colour in his face didn't seem to be faring any better - purple to white to beet red since he had first walked into Dumbledore's office that afternoon. Harry wondered how many shades the man's face could turn in one sitting. "I don't know what you're t-talking about, Mr. ... Mr. Riddle." He *hmp*'d dramatically for emphasis, but, somehow, Voldemort's given name did not sound nearly as patronizing coming from Slughorn's mouth as it did from Dumbledore's. "I knew you would go wrong, right from the beginning, *I did!* I didn't want anything to do with you!" Perspiration had broken out on the big man's brow, and he shuffled backward a little, clearly attempting to loosen himself from Voldemort's grasp.

Harry watched with horror as Voldemort dissolved into horrible, breathless giggles, a high disturbing sound that contrasted harshly with the face of the dark, attractive boy that refused to leave Harry's mind. He felt sorry for Slughorn, he really did - but he couldn't help but also feel relieved that Voldemort had not turned his attention to Harry in his headmaster's absence. "*Oh...*" Voldemort murmured between maniacal giggles, "*Oh... of course* you did..." He was near-hysterical with mirth, driving his claws mercilessly into the fat shoulder, the forked tongue hissing viciously into Slughorn's ear. "This from the man who told me I could be Minister of Magic by the age of-

He stopped, catching Harry's gaze, and there was no more thanking lucky stars, nowhere far or dark enough in this tiny room to hide from the intensity that hit him in that moment. The nails released Slughorn and the man almost crumpled. Voldemort stared at Harry like a snake hypnotised, the laughter dead in his throat. *And Voldemort was a Legilimens...*

"Harry..."

Heat rushed over Harry in a wave, and he was vaguely aware that his lips were still parted with surprise, but he couldn't bring himself to move, to look away. Voldemort was *staring* at him, looking at Harry like he was the most fascinating creature in the world, and Harry once again might have truly believed that Voldemort had only seen him for the first time right now, just now, if he hadn't already felt this way twice in the past twelve hours. Looking at Voldemort's face like this - so raw, almost naked - it was almost easy to see the young man in his imagination behind the pale, perfect mask of Voldemort's visage. Harry flushed at this thought, and furiously attempted to separate

young, attractive Tom Riddle from this man - *monster* - in front of him - but it was too late and to little avail.

Wrong, wrong, wrongwrongwrong. This had gotten out of control way too fast.

Swallowing, Harry forced himself to take a step back, tore his gaze away to look pleadingly at Slughorn for assistance. But, Merlin, the professor was still collapsed on the floor, breathing in huge, panicked sobs. Harry realized with a jolt of panic that his own breathing wasn't coping too well either; he closed his eyes forcibly and tried to steady himself. *Breathe.* Perhaps, when he opened his eyes, Voldemort would have lost interest and returned to antagonizing the teacher on the floor.

Dark magic buzzed as skeletal fingers wrapped around Harry's face and Voldemort's breath fanned his closed lids. *"You cannot defeat Lord Voldemort, Harry..."* he murmured. The fingers against his jaw were somehow cold and hot at the same time - freezing against the surface of his skin, but warmth, such warmth underneath, a fire beneath his face. Harry felt the smooth pads of Voldemort's thumbs pry open his lips, slowly, tenderly, and a wonderful shudder passed through him, far too pleasant a sensation for the person invoking it.

It was because of this that Harry kept his eyes closed, the sharp edge of terror warring with the delicious heat pooling at the base of his stomach. He would rather stand here, pathetic and vulnerable with his lips parted and Voldemort's hands spread across his cheeks, than to open his eyes and react. To open his eyes meant releasing this moment, returning to the cold, horrible fear that Voldemort's presence created - *or* - or he might open his eyes, look into the blood-stained gaze of the Dark Lord, and find that nothing had changed about this moment at all. And that somehow was worse than all the terror in the world.

Voldemort was speaking to him softly, in low, intimate hisses that touched his eyelids, his forehead. *"You will lose... but perhaps... perhaps it is not necessary to kill you, after all..."*

Harry did open his eyes then, surprise getting the better of him. *What was that supposed to mean?* Brow furrowing, Harry stared up at the Dark Lord, rather dizzy from his proximity - so close that Voldemort could surely feel how hard Harry's heart was beating, a vehement tattoo against his rib cage. His lip trembled underneath the Dark Lord's finger, and he took a deep breath, trying to find the will to

Speak -

And then there was the sound of flames rearing up on the hearth, followed by a loud cough, and before Harry knew what had happened, those hot-cold fingers that had been tugging at his soul-strings though the skin of his jaw had vanished, and Voldemort was standing straight and blank-faced, like nothing had transpired between them at all. The only sign that Dumbledore noticed anything out of the ordinary was a little frown twisting his lips as his gaze passed from Slughorn, who was still clutching at his heart on the floor, to Harry, who realised at this moment that he was shaking and had to bite his bottom lip hard - his lip, which still was tingling from that small, soft touch of Voldemort's fingers - to stop.

"I'm sorry to say that Mundungus was not pleased with the idea of making your acquaintance, Tom," said Dumbledore, not sounding very sorry at all. "Fortunately, he was kind enough to pass this along so that you can be on your way." He reached into his robe, and out came the heavy gold locket, just as brilliant and ornate as Harry remembered from his vivid dream the night before.

Voldemort nodded stiffly. The pale talons reached out once more, this time to the precious heirloom of gold and emeralds. It flew from the Headmaster into his grasp. "The boy shall know I have fulfilled my promise," he said, hardly looking at the other three people in the room, clearly too preoccupied with his locket.

A buzzing tension slowly unravelled within Harry's chest. It was not a familiar sensation to him, but he recognized it immediately for what it was: the dissipation of their magical agreement, having been fulfilled by both involved parties. Harry wondered hopefully if perhaps that strange, magnetic pull toward the Dark Lord's person might have dissolved with the bond as well - but, no, a few deep breaths later and Harry still found himself remembering the cool touch of those long, smooth fingers tracing his jawline with something distressingly close to longing.

"Yes," said Harry quietly. He looked at his feet, cheeks still burning with shame and confusion. "He has."

Dumbledore clapped his hands together. "Very well then! A pleasure, Tom, as always, but I'm sure we both have more pressing matters to attend to now that this has been resolved." Like destroying the rest of Voldemort's soul. How ironic and how very strange, that these two enemies could be so civil with each other. Almost as strange as

Voldemort touching the face of the boy he was destined to kill, whispering in a secret language that perhaps he would spare Harry's life after all. Harry tried not to shiver or shift, instead memorizing the pattern of his trainers and feeling very confused and angry toward every single person in the room - save for Slughorn, who was still the colour of a turnip and for whom Harry could conjure up little more than detached pity.

"Indeed," Lord Voldemort nodded again to the Headmaster, sending Harry one last indecipherable glance before turning, the door opening and closing almost noiselessly behind him.

Gone.

"That was very foolish of you, Harry." Dumbledore sounded deeply disappointed. It made Harry want to hex something.

"And what would you have done if I hadn't said anything?" Harry finally looked up from the floor, his eyes settling on Dumbledore's sad, disapproving expression, and all of the confused, wayward emotion in him gathered together into one boiling hot ball of anger. "I was sitting right here, sir. You were thinking about it - about handing over the lives of all of those innocent people."

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and Harry's irritation with the man climbed further. "I would have bought us *time*, dear boy, valuable time!" The headmaster shook his head, and Harry was disturbed to find that Dumbledore's behaviour toward Harry was really quite similar to the way that he had treated Voldemort. "You acted very rashly today, Harry. It was not your place to do that."

"And what is my place, then?" Harry demanded, his voice rising. "To offer up my neck on the altar, and watch passively while everyone else makes the important decisions? You said you weren't going to hide anything from me anymore." There was a note of hurt in his voice, and he was aware that it made him sound very childish. This realization only made him even angrier, a burning red flame in his stomach, and Harry decided that he needed to leave before he started throwing things again; he had a feeling that another temper tantrum, no matter how justified, would not help his cause.

"Harry," Dumbledore began after another one of his long-suffering sighs, but the boy had already begun to stride toward the exit, pausing only to peel the dangling lollipop from his trouser leg, which, he noticed with dismay, had sported a large, smoking hole in the upper

right thigh from its prolonged contact with the acidic candy. Scowling, he threw it to the floor - apparently too close in proximity to Slughorn, who yelped rather girlishly - and stormed out of the office. And if the door closed a little too loudly behind him, it was only because it had caught a draft. The castle was full of them.

Harry let out a long breath that he didn't know he'd been holding, sagging against the stone wall; cool through the hole in his trousers. And what was that about? The skin of his leg was completely intact, not a blister or bruise to be seen, even as the material that had clothed it had curled up in tatters in a hole that was roughly the size of an orange. He heard Slughorn say something through the closed door of the office and headed for the stairs, unwilling to risk extending this unpleasant encounter any longer should either of his professors walk out into the hallway.

Bitterly, he wondered whether he should return to the common room and tell Ron and Hermione what had happened. They always seemed to know how to cool him down. But then he remembered that the common room was currently packed with every student in Gryffindor House, eagerly awaiting news of the attack on Diagon Alley and why it might affect the safety of Hogwarts students, and decided that the recollection of his meeting with Voldemort was best left for a private conversation.

Harry headed for the stairs. Perhaps he would pay a visit to the library and see if this *Dream Warrior* book had anything useful to say.

Potter's friends had obviously done their job, for the Dark Lord saw not a soul as he strode down the stone stairs, stopping only to collect Ravenclaw's diadem from the secret room only he had ever discovered. But secrecy was not enough now that his and Potter's thoughts were so intimately entwined. Bellatrix Lestrange should be back from Diagon Alley by now with Hufflepuff's golden cup.

The afternoon light was fading by the time Voldemort, invisible, reached the castle's great oaken doors. He shivered in the crisp, Scottish air and felt the breath of winter up his spine. The locket was still warm from Dumbledore's palm, and the sweaty paws of the Order's thief. He had felt its joy at being reunited. Yet it was cold. Its metal did not quiver at his touch and its magic was but a poor echo of his own power. Voldemort felt cheated, bereft at finding one of the few things he had ever cared for - *the locket of noble Slytherin!* - hollow by comparison to Harry Potter. It felt as empty as its image in his

dream. Nor did the diadem offer him any more comfort than the locket. Two Horcruxes and still nothing compared to Harry Potter's touch. The Dark Lord took to the air, trying to escape his thoughts, twisting above the cloud line until –

(everything broke apart, void, and was remade into)

- the darkness of his shrouded rooms and the feel of his hand on Nagini's scales. "*My lovely one,*" he whispered as her shining amber eyes glittered in the firelight and he caressed her dark green scales, listening to her chatter happily about the rodents she had devoured, the scents she had tasted, and how pleased she was that he - her Master - had returned.

He wanted to scream, to destroy, to kill - *killkillkill* - but that desire belonged to the most base of his instincts: sadism fused to the predatory mind of a serpent, aided by magic so steeped in darkness it thrilled and exalted at the prospect of murder. But Lord Voldemort was master over his inhumanity, icy serenity smoothing over his rage almost at once. It was only when he lost his temper that he became a creature bereft of human faculties. His life now was a battle with those mercurial emotions which could so easily lay waste to all sense. Voldemort fought to remain lucid, fought not to drown in the black, predatory rush of his own cruel power. Another reason he could not - *could not* - afford to lose any more of his precious soul-shards.

Instead, he sat by the glow of the fire with his pet curled around his chair and pretended all was well. For he could not tell even her of those things that had shaken him to the core. Voldemort had no confidant, no friend, and his lofty pride would not allow him to admit weakness even to Nagini.

He gazed upon his beautiful treasures: the locket, the cup, the diadem, and his cherished snake. Yet he could think only of Harry Potter; entranced and entrancing. A white hand stroked the vessels, trying to recreate the sensation, to convince himself it was nothing he could not find in any of his Horcruxes. The pieces of soul which held fast his spirit and his sanity. Precious beyond measure: emerald, diamond, sapphire, silver and gold - the relics of the founders and the glossy scales of his familiar. But they were as hungry and dissatisfied as he - they did nothing to fill the ache he felt. It gnawed and infuriated him. He, Lord Voldemort, was the most accomplished, the most powerful sorcerer alive. Immortal. He had just forced the dying Albus Dumbledore into submission.

Lord Voldemort closed his eyes, watching the interminable echoes of light that danced behind his lids. The minds of his servants hid nothing from him. He knew some of them thought his obsession with Potter was something unnatural. The tortured screams of the agonies they suffered for daring to suppose such a thing was, until this point, vindication enough. He moved to the bed, removing his robes, adjusting his hairless body beneath black sheets, and pulling up the quilt - saturated in heating charms to last the cold blood of himself and Nagini through winter. The logs in the hearth shifted, crackling.

The Dark Lord had fantasied about Potter's death for too long – and now the world had shifted and Potter's place was still in his grasp but his desires had changed. Potter was *his*. His to keep, and his to torture, and his to visit with unspeakable annihilation until the boy shone with the darkness of the soul trapped within him. He curled up beneath the covers. Autumn was almost over and the instinct to hibernate was strong. But he was a wizard, not a serpent, and he could not stop because his blood was growing sluggish and telling him to sleep. Potter would be his in due course. *All* would be his in time.

I am Lord Voldemort. But the words brought him small comfort.

Part II

It was warm here. The Pacific Ocean sprawled beneath Lord Voldemort, jewel blue under the sun. He remembered this: not far from the wizarding isle of R'lyeh. And through sheer joy of heat and magic, Voldemort sped across the limitless horizon like fleeting smoke on the wind. He called to Potter with the sea air, the pleasure of flight, summoning his Horcrux forth above the white-capped waves, ready to grasp the boy's wet shoulders from the water...

Three nights passed, one after the other, and Harry's sleep remained dreamless, his scar painless, and his days free of the Dark Lord's influence. But he did not dare to mistake this for peace. Voldemort's behaviour during their latest encounter at the headmaster's office had been downright bizarre. Even if the man hadn't made it his personal life goal to see Harry dead before he reached adulthood, Voldemort had clearly been furious at Dumbledore's interruption of their strange conversation. Harry was certain that he could anticipate another visit from Voldemort in the near future.

So when the boy was drifting off to sleep many nights later, he was both expecting and dreading the gentle, insistent pull at the core of his being, a string tugging his soul from his body and into the arms of another.

In a vain attempt to prepare himself for this, Harry had spent day after day scouring the school library, searching for the title that Voldemort had mentioned in passing during that last nightmare. Madame Pince, however, insisted that there was no such book called *Dream Warrior* in all of Hogwarts, and even with Hermione's assistance, the only thing that Harry could find was a beaten volume titled *Dream Wanderer*. It didn't seem like anything that would ever interest Voldemort, or even Tom Riddle for that matter, but Harry had decided to read it cover-to-cover anyway when his hopes of discovering the other book had all but vanished.

Now, as the tugging became stronger, more irresistible, Harry recalled the advice that *Dream Wanderer* had imparted to keep control of his dreams. *I am a tree*, he thought with determination, feeling rather silly as darkness continued to swallow him. *I am rooted in the earth. I am strong and sturdy. I am a tree.*

Almost immediately, he felt wood against his fingers, splintery and rough. Harry frowned. That wasn't right; he was a tree, not was with a tree. *I am a tree*, he thought, with more emphasis behind it this time, his face screwing up with concentration. *I am a tree. I am a tree. I am a*
—

Water, wet and cold and powerful, crashed over his front, and Harry was thrown onto his side, spluttering and clinging to the wood below him and suddenly grateful to be holding anything at all. His eyes flew open, and instead of the darkness of the Gryffindor dormitory, he found himself looking up at a bright, cloudless blue sky, the scent of sea-salt strong in his nostrils. There was no tree near him, after all - no trees anywhere in sight, for that matter. He was sprawled atop a makeshift raft - shivering in his shorts and night-shirt, seawater dripping from his bangs - in the middle of the ocean.

The giant serpent rose out of the water, tossing its seaweed mane and flicking its long forked tongue between tombstone teeth. The scaled, equine head spun suddenly and dived again, deluging everything in its wake. A fraction of the enormous tail thrashed, nearly destroying the small raft to which Potter clung. Its squamous nose surfaced again, shooting out a salty jet; the massive, golden, half-submerged eyes rolling. It was happy.

It had been a long time ago that Voldemort had visited this part of the world, eager to learn the black magic practised by the native shamans of Pohnpei and thence to read the darkly inscribed glyphs of sunken R'lyeh. It was by pure chance that he had come across this Sea Serpent frisking its coils in the ocean surf. It had brought out the boy in him, the child who had opened the Chamber of Secrets and commanded the King of Serpents within.

"Potter!" he called, flying just low enough for his fluttering, silken robes to catch the spray. His pale, flat mask of a face had never seemed more serpentine, glistening and patterned by the water. He landed on the raft with the grace of a black sea bird, swirling with that supreme magic which seemed to frisk and furl about him like the vast serpent under the water.

Harry, on the other hand, was soaked and gasping for breath. If he hadn't been frightened enough when a huge, spiked tail almost upended the dubious raft keeping him afloat, he thought he might have a very Muggle heart attack when a terrible black shape came

rushing across the sea's surface, powerful magic swirling around it like some sort of flying, vampiric monster. He couldn't say whether he was slightly relieved or even more terrified when he recognized the flash of a crimson gaze through the sea-spray, a familiar voice calling out his name like a long-lost friend.

"Er," Harry said breathlessly, not quite sure what else to say. His night-shirt was clinging to his chest, water running in rivulets down his face. The sea monster leapt up from the water again at a comfortably safe distance, flipping its great tail behind it as it dove back into the water with a tremendous splash. Harry was torn between the hysterical urge to laugh and the sudden impulse to topple Voldemort from his precarious perch on the edge of the raft, right into the waves. "Fancy meeting you here."

Voldemort smiled, inclining his head in regal acknowledgement; his taut grin almost shark-like. The crimson eyes were wild, almost intoxicated. His bare feet glided toward Potter with the lightness of one who could take to the air or the water with ease. "Is it not beautiful?" he hissed, a long-fingered hand flung out toward the creature, his gaze fixed on Potter. The boy was shivering, his nightshirt soaked. And there was fear there too, thick and enticing. "Tell me, have you ever ridden a Sea Serpent?"

"Um - no." Potter drew his knees up to his chest, covered in goose bumps. "I did battle a dragon once. Can't say I was ever that eager to meet another one." He looked warily over Voldemort's shoulder at the sea monster with its gleaming scales, enormous snout, and massive fangs.

Voldemort smirked down at the heap of wet teenager crouching on the precarious raft. "But you are Harry Potter, are you not?" The serpent's tail thrashed again, causing the raft to almost overturn. He fought the impulse to laugh. "Famous Gryffindor extraordinaire." And Voldemort hissed a command to the ocean beast, and the yew wand flicked a spell at Potter just as the Dark Lord leapt from the raft and dove into the cold water, closing only one set of translucent eyelids as he did so, and swimming towards the serpent with the sinuous ease of a Grindylow.

The Sea Serpent roared beneath the waves and leapt skyward, Voldemort clinging effortlessly to its salty mane as he had once ridden Slytherin's Basilisk. The scaled creature arced through the air before diving deep, past vibrant coral and schools of luminous fish.

The Dark Lord had just enough time to see the creature's mate raise its giant, glistening head, upon which Harry Potter's raft sat like some tenuous fascinater of driftwood, boy and weed, before the two serpents began to race.

Harry might have sworn and cursed and shouted if his mouth hadn't been spitting out a faceful of freezing salt water. He was swept away by the dizzying sensation of flying, flying, and then diving again; he clung desperately to his flimsy raft as though it might save him - and then he was crashing under the water again, engulfed by a great wave. His mouth, his eyes, his lungs were full of sea. Perhaps this was Voldemort's sick idea of a joke. Harry was going to drown now; they would find him drenched in his bed, blue and bloated and the sheets dripping wet with seawater.

He was completely out of breath now, body tossed about like a small doll beneath the ocean's surface with every thrash and twist of the huge snake's body, every cell of his being bursting for oxygen. Resigning himself to his fate, Harry opened his lips, sucked in a lungful of water - and *breathed*.

His body sagged with relief, the colour returning to his face; he was breathing, breathing water, but it was as natural as breathing the air above the surface and somehow just as effective. How had he failed to find this spell for the Triwizard Tournament? He opened his eyes - his spectacles had been snatched from his face by the angry ocean waves as soon as he'd gone under - but he could see the ocean floor in perfect clarity, see the big sea monster right underneath him, long tendrils of seaweed sprouting from its back. Harry's craft was splintered and broken all around him, pieces floating by.

And then suddenly he was being pushed violently upward, and he emerged into the open air in a burst of water and ocean spray, sitting atop the creature's head like an absurd, scaly throne. The monster didn't stop in its rapid ascent, however, and Harry spilled forward to his knees, taking great fists of the creature's mane to hold himself steady, panic and terror coursing through him when he realized that the serpent was still leaping upward.

Panic, and terror, and - and - and a burst of brilliant adrenaline that Harry only associated with long hours on a broomstick, racing for a snitch, his favourite thing to do in the entire world.

Voldemort was commandeering his own serpent, apparently, one just

as large and formidable as Harry's own. They made eye contact for only a second - but in that second he caught the challenge in Voldemort's gaze, an invitation to some strange, oceanic competition between the two of them. And, well, Harry couldn't very well turn down a challenge, could he? Especially one that involved flying and soaring and racing on the back of this powerful, magical monster.

"Go," Harry heard himself say, slipping easily into the serpent's native language. *"Race. Bring me victory."*

The serpent gave a great, hissing roar before it took off, flying back into the water. Harry clung to the creature's mane for dear life, but, oh, it was brilliant - there were fish in every colour scattering as they shot by in a rush of bubbles and blue-green scales, twisting and turning in a cutthroat race. When was the last time he had felt such exhilaration? Quidditch had lost nearly all of its glamour upon his promotion to team captain; Harry only had time to catch the snitch before Malfoy did something to knock Ron to his early death, never mind actually enjoy the game, the rush, the excitement.

A great burst of laughter erupted from him, but it only escaped from his mouth in muffled bubbles, inaudible through the thick ocean water. Never mind that it was only a dream, never mind that it was Voldemort's idea that was bringing him such joy - Harry hadn't felt this alive in months, and he was bloody well going to enjoy it.

It was not the wild, seaborne race that held Lord Voldemort spellbound. Although he thrilled as the Sea Serpents corkscrewed above a forest of brilliantly-coloured anemones and myriads of ghostly jellyfish, thence to be flying above the ocean - dipping and soaring, just as he had that day so many years ago - it was his Horcrux which captivated him. Potter's young aura illuminated the old memory and Voldemort's heart raced at the joy coursing through him. The Dark Lord let his own serpent fall back, allowing Potter's beast to plunge ahead, just to feel the pulse of pure exultation that rippled across his mindscape.

He had chosen this memory to please the boy, and Severus Snape had told him of Potter's penchant for Quidditch; not to mention that Voldemort had suggested - *oh, how far away such things seemed* - that Quirrel should curse Potter's broom. But he did not wish to think of that painful, parasitic existence. Lord Voldemort was quite content to lose a meaningless chase if it meant his mind could feast on the warmth and liveliness of Potter's emotions - blazing brighter than the

sun and more lively than the twisting, joyous serpents.

The great snake broke through the ocean's surface once more, gliding through the air like a huge, scaly bird - but this time, Harry could see the distant shape of land. Renewed rivalry surged up within him, and Harry held fast to the creature's mane, urging it onward with commands hissed in Parseltongue, his thighs clenched tightly around the beast's neck as firmly as he might straddle a broom. So caught up was he in his determination to win that he did not notice the Dark Lord hanging back, remaining just behind him, so that when their serpents emerged at the island, he was both shocked and thrilled to see that he had arrived at their destination first.

The serpent bowed its head on the shore, allowing Harry to dismount dizzily. He was unable to keep from smiling, a huge, silly grin that stretched from ear to ear. The sand was warm between his toes and stuck to his wet ankles and calves as he stumbled giddily onto shore, feeling as though he had just won Britain the Quidditch World Cup.

Voldemort neatly dismounted, his bare toes floating over the waves washing in over the sand. He watched Potter staggering happily up the beach, exhausted and euphoric. The Dark Lord had not felt such repletion for a long time. He could not really feel it now, he could only savour the momentary experience of the emotion as it bled from Potter into the mind wrapped around his like a cocoon.

The closest he could come to the boy's joy was perhaps the anticipatory rightness which came before an Avada Kedavra and the triumphal satisfaction of watching an opponent of Lord Voldemort crumple like a marionette whose strings are cut. Pleasure seemed to slip through his fingers, gone before he'd had time to relish it. Nor could he draw out his enjoyment like his faithful Bellatrix. Torture was punishment for those who displeased him, an instrument of wrath; it was necessary to function in the crass, inferior world in which he found himself.

It had been different before that ill-fated Halloween night. He remembered it had... now that he tasted the sublimity of his Horcrux's pride. Thirteen years of pain beyond pain. No measure of the Cruciatus Curse, however vindictive, could compare with that sleepless, interminable agony which had devoured everything but his hunger to return. That pitiless desire, forged in the Albanian forest, had ripped an irrevocable hole in his character. Voldemort lived in

near constant rage, constant want - sometimes muted but oft-times consuming everything in its path. It was always there, that forest, like a wound over which no amount of triumph could ever scab.

"Wow. Excellent. Wow." Potter spun around, clearly oblivious to Voldemort's melancholy, and treated the Dark Lord to a shining smile. "I beat you. Do I get a prize now?"

He wanted Potter to stay in this giddy happiness forever, high on the excitement of their gambolling. He did not wish the sky to darken with his own thoughts, which dwelt bitterly on the curse which had stripped him of power and the baby with green eyes who had watched as he had been reduced to the weakest creature alive. "I was under the impression that victory was its own reward," he said softly, solemn, his voice almost lost in the crash of the waves. "But Lord Voldemort could conjure some trinket, if you so desire." He remembered the puffs of coloured smoke James Potter had produced for his son's amusement and the Dark Lord tried to restrain his anger at this child, and linger in the pleasant exhilaration Potter exuded.

Voldemort drew his wand across the air, leaving a trail of molten gold gleaming in its wake. It writhed and blossomed, separating into two prancing Sea Serpents, as bright and sleek as the silver prosthesis he had crafted for Wormtail. They sped towards Potter - still in competition - circling him happily, whispering to themselves and the boy, alighting upon one shoulder only to leap to the other; perfect, golden simulacra of the beasts they had just ridden.

Harry had been bracing himself for a hex, or possibly even a Dark curse; he had not been expecting this soft-spoken, pensive creature, staring at Harry strangely as two miniature replicas of the large, beautiful sea creatures came leaping from the tip of the Dark Lord's wand. Harry was momentarily distracted by this delight - magic in its simplest, purest form, leaping playfully about his neck and shoulders. He couldn't suppress a giggle as one nuzzled his ear, a golden tongue flicking against his earlobe; still grinning sloppily, he raised his arm to his neck, and the sea-snakes twined about it obediently, curling against each other as they twirled up and up his arm.

But there was something not quite right in the dreamscape, a disturbance on the peaceful shore. Harry looked up and the smile fell abruptly from his face. Voldemort was clearly very unhappy. Was he disappointed that the sea monster hadn't gobbled Harry up? Or perhaps he was just angry that he hadn't bested Harry at his own

game?

Inspired, Harry coaxed one of the serpents to detach itself from its mate. Some whispered Parseltongue, and the creature was sent gliding back to its master, leaving Harry with its twin still coiling happily about his arm.

"There," Harry said, "now we've both won. I had an advantage over you, anyhow - I'm pretty decent on a broom. Total disclosure." He tried for another smile, but it didn't come to him as naturally as before. Something was very wrong with this situation. Lord Voldemort wanted to kill him, watch him suffer. Why had he brought Harry here? And what was wrong with Harry, standing here, grinning and teasing and making jokes with his would-be murderer? The smile receded from Harry's face altogether as he contemplated this, studying Voldemort's face, searching for a glimpse of his true purpose here.

Voldemort watched the golden serpent return to dance around his thin wrist. He was not sure of what to say, only conscious that something needed to be said. This moment had long occupied his mind, and his contemplations had filled it with persuasive deceptions.

"You must have realised, Harry Potter," he began, trying to be gentle, burying his rage as deeply as possible, feeling very much the man of nearly seventy he was - immortal or not - "that matters have changed between us."

The Dark Lord felt cheated as Potter's joyful aura receded from him. He wanted to order the boy to remain content; to torture and break him for the cruel joke fate had played upon Lord Voldemort. Potter only stared. "Yes. You said you - might not kill me, that day in Dumbledore's office."

"I did, and you know that Lord Voldemort does nothing without reason. I admit, I lied to you in the last dream we shared. Perhaps lying is too strong a word - I omitted something, something both Dumbledore and I knew that day of which you speak. It is... it is too cruel a thing, even for us." The anguine face was carefully blank, the scarlet eyes equally so. Black clouds rolled across the sky and Voldemort fought the fury that was beginning to spiral out of control as the grey surf grew higher, whipped up by the freezing wind.

Potter stepped back, heel sinking into the sand, shivering. His eyes were filled with horror and denial. "I - don't know what you're talking about."

"Your scar - the curse - it took more from me than my body." The words came easily in the end, though they barely constituted a whisper. "It was the locket I mistook for my soul, not you."

The winds climbed to a howling roar, the heavens churned with dark clouds that cast ocean and island in shadow. And yet Harry could still hear those terrible words over the gale, still see the crimson eyes burning in the cold, grey light - reflecting Harry's own image from within their dark depths. "No," Harry choked out, his fingers flying automatically to his scar, as though they could rip it right from his forehead. His eyes were wide and naked without his glasses, and they shone with every ounce of his horror. "No, it's not true."

But it was true. Everything was beginning to make sense - the dreams, the waking flashes into Voldemort's consciousness - even the Parseltongue was not his own. The ocean was churning behind the Dark Lord's silhouette, the sky black and purple, bruised by the horror of this realization. He wanted the great sea serpent to rise up from the waves again and swallow him whole, to run and throw himself into the ocean and suck water into his lungs until it washed this unspeakable blemish out from his body. The dreamscape was dark and shaking, falling apart with the horrible instability of Voldemort's nightmare - or was it his nightmare now, his dream, reflecting the growing discord within his own mind? And did it even really matter, when their souls were melded together by the seams, one and the same?

Harry's hands clawed at his forehead, his mouth opened, and he screamed.

The world fell apart in an explosion of darkness and pain, falling down around him, out from under him - and a moment later, he found himself tangled in blankets and sheets, shouting and thrashing, bright wandlight in his face.

He was drenched in cold sweat. Dean went and got him some water while Ron asked him over and over if Harry was certain that he didn't want to call for the headmaster - yes, he was sure, yes, it was only a dream, *only a nightmare*, everything was perfectly alright.

Perhaps he would be able to convince himself of this as well. Over an hour later, when his dorm mates had finally returned rather shaken, to their own beds, he had truly almost managed to. Just a dream indeed, and an impossible dream, an absurd dream at that. But when he had

finally laid down his head, his eyelids heavy with exhaustion, his fingers slipped beneath his pillow and met with something cool and smooth. It was with great dread that Harry extracted the long, golden snake, every scale perfectly engraved, its eyes flickering open sleepily to hiss at Harry for interrupting its slumber - living, writhing proof of something that Harry could easily spend an entire lifetime denying.

The last thing Lord Voldemort saw was Harry Potter's mouth opening like a fault line. The rictus grew larger and larger until its fissure eviscerated the child, leaving the Dark Lord standing alone at the edge of the fierce, roiling sea. The aching fury he felt possessed both the acrid sting imparted by fleeting hope and the bitter satisfaction of normalcy - only the first fled with sleep and the latter boiled over into waking.

When he woke - spitting curses in Parseltongue, his clawed hands tearing lines in the fine sheets, and his magic and mind fighting him for control - he could smell fear and perspiration and hear faint voices, as if carried on the wind from a long way off. The enchanted serpent was still circling his hand in an affectionate bracelet. *There... now we've both won.* Voldemort flung it away, temper flaring. It hit the wall with a pained cry and slithered out of sight.

Before, Harry Potter had been a latent part of Lord Voldemort, unknowing host to the hungry piece of soul inside him. But now... now the Dark Lord was just as tethered to Potter as Potter was to him for, like Nagini, Potter was no inanimate object. He had magic of his own through which Voldemort's soul could soothe or scream. A piece of him, lurking inside the boy's flesh, and it was concerned for its shell even as it longed for its lord. It mattered not how callow and despised was the youth who carried his treasure, Lord Voldemort was now his custodian. Before, he had been jealous of Potter's pain, fiercely possessive of his final agonies. Potter had always been *his*. His to torment and his to kill. Now his to keep. Power the Dark Lord knows not... *marked as my equal*. Voldemort had a momentary burst of pride in that fact - of course Lord Voldemort could only be equalled by *himself*.

The Dark Lord relaxed into the pillows and Nagini's coils, slowing his breathing, calming his vengeful senses and the hungry magic which glutted itself on pain and fury. He would not need to call Potter's sleeping mind to him again. As he reached out with his mind to taste the boy's denial and terror, his lipless mouth twitched with sadistic satisfaction. The child was weak - easily manipulated by the suffering

of others - especially since this final revelation had surely severed the last vestige of trust Potter had in the Headmaster.

He would continue to marshal his forces and await the death of Albus Dumbledore - whilst targeting the most vulnerable of Potter's acquaintance. *Perhaps the Mudblood's family?* And when Potter sought him out, Lord Voldemort would be ready.

Morning bled into afternoon, and Harry did not rise from his bed. He spent his time drifting in and out of a dreamless sleep. When he was awake, he stroked his golden prize with one finger and chatted with it idly in Parseltongue, doing everything he could to keep his nightmare from his mind. He had considered shutting the serpent in his bedside drawer, but one look at the sleeping snake - even as a mere inanimate object, only made to breathe and hiss by Voldemort's magic - left him feeling guilty for even entertaining such a cruel idea. The golden scales of the serpent were a reminder of the joy of his flight in that dream; it was a small companion that had shared in his terror, that did not judge him, that had soothed him back to sleep when Voldemort had revealed that -

But whenever his mind began to wander to the events of the night before, he would quickly crush the thought, roll over onto his side, and force his eyes shut, letting the sleepy hisses of his golden snake lull him back to a numbing state of half-slumber.

Three times, the door to the dormitory opened, a pair of feet padded across the stone floor, and Ron's voice, tentative and soft, said his name. The first two times, Harry simply ignored him, breathing deeply and holding tight to his trophy until his friend went away, closing the door behind him. The third time, when the afternoon light was beginning to bleed orange and red through his bed curtains, there was nothing gentle about the door opening, and the curtains were thrown aside so abruptly that he'd hardly had time to make sure that his new treasure was properly hidden away beneath his pillow. It took at least ten minutes for him to convince Ron, who had now brought more persistent and shriller reinforcement in the form of Hermione, that he really was alright, just some very awful headaches, and that he simply wanted to take advantage of the weekend to catch up on his rest.

He slept without interruption through the rest of the evening. Voldemort did not visit his dreams again.

Harry might have spent the next morning in bed, too, if Hermione had

not marched up to the boys' dormitory and threatened to summon Dumbledore if he did not go to his classes. Harry did not speak to her for the rest of the day. In fact, he spoke very little to anyone at all, including Ron, who made several hearty attempts at horsing around and even offered to listen if Harry needed to talk about anything, anything at all. But Harry couldn't articulate the confusion and self-loathing that consumed him like a dark cloud, a constant reminder of what he was, of what his future held - darkness, darkness, shadow. *I am tainted.*

He could not concentrate during any of his classes, and lost Gryffindor a record sixty-five points during Defence Against the Dark Arts. It had begun when Snape had asked him a question - a simple one, too, concerning a basic hex he had taught the other students himself during Dumbledore's Army, for Merlin's sake - and all Harry could do was stare blankly ahead, his mind empty.

I am tainted. I am damaged. I will never be the same.

And then, later, when the glinting gold of his dinner goblet instantly brought to mind that wretched locket, his own familiar, a new thought joined this mantra -

I will have to die.

Harry went to bed early that night, and slept, and slept, and slept some more. He might have slept forever, had a gentle hand on his shoulder not tugged him from sleep, into bright, dazzling sunlight. "It's past noon, Harry," Dumbledore said without a smile.

"You knew," Harry said, before he could stop himself. "You *knew* - and you never told me."

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently, but Harry wasn't having any of it. He sat up in bed furiously.

"You never said a word! Making as if those memories were simply so we could learn about the prophecy - as if you didn't know all along about what he'd done to his soul - what he'd done to *me* -"

"I had only suspected, my dear boy. I did not see the sense in panicking you when I was not yet completely -"

"You promised you wouldn't hide anything from me anymore!" said Harry angrily. "Yet you've been acting nothing but mysterious since the school year started!"

"I assure you that I have been telling you everything of which I am -"

"The Acid Pop." Harry sat straight up. "What was that about? You realised something that day - why didn't it hurt me?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily. He suddenly looked very tired. "The moment you walked into my office, Harry, I sensed that there had been a great change in your magical signature. I suspected that - once he had realised that you were carrying a piece of his soul - Lord Voldemort placed a number of protective enchantments around you. The Acid Pop confirmed this theory."

For a moment, Harry only gaped at him. "Does that mean I'm - invincible?"

"I imagine that Voldemort wanted to ensure that nothing could damage the vessel carrying a piece of his soul - except for, perhaps, himself."

Harry sunk further into his pillows. "Well, that's just *great*. It's a good thing he's the only one who's got it out for me, then, isn't it?" He turned on his side, away from his professor.

Dumbledore sighed again and sat down lightly on the edge of Harry's bed without asking first. He seemed very old again. How had Harry never noticed his age before? "I do not expect you to share every detail of your life with your old headmaster, Harry, but I will beseech you not to push away your friends. You will find, in time, that the power of friendship will offer you more assistance than any magic that there is."

Harry recalled Dumbledore having said something similar about the power of love, once, but his mother's sacrifice had not halted the inevitable stride of destiny, latching Voldemort's soul to the ugly scar on his forehead.

"They care very deeply about you, Harry."

And so Harry got out of bed and dressed in silence, his golden snake tucked away in his robes, as much of a security in his pocket as the touch of his wand. He went to his class - Transfiguration, late, earning him a glare from McGonagall, but nothing more. He apologized to Hermione and Ron for his strange behaviour, and smiled, and laughed in all the right places. He could do this; he could pretend, for the sake of his friends, and wait out the week, and then the next, waiting, waiting, but never forgetting. For in every shadow, every corner,

every blink of his eyes, the darkness hissed his name, whispered with a forked, devilish tongue:

You are tainted, Harry. You are damaged, Harry. You will have to die.

Long, pale fingers delicately dipped a darkly-feathered quill into a silver inkstand. Lord Voldemort eagerly returned the nib to where he had left off, listing combinations of runes and numbers, black ink spreading a thick forest of complex Arithmantic equations across the parchment. He was trying to realise an idea for combining an Inferius with a live host. There would be a great deal of subtle Transfiguration required, as well as enchantments to forestall the deterioration of the body. Some would have said Polyjuice Potion could achieve the same effect of impersonation, but the brew was limited by its duration, and the Dark Lord was fascinated by the idea of a living creature possessing the dead.

He bit his thin lip, hunching forward over the desk, until his flat nose was almost touching the damp symbols. Voldemort stared at the diagrams for a moment before putting aside his quill to leaf through the dog-eared pages of Malfoy Manor's rare copy of Balfour's notorious *Cultes des Goules*. Before Voldemort's advent, it was probable that no one had disturbed the grim volume in centuries, for it was badly beaten and without a cover. Only by sensing the deep traces of Dark rituals staining its pages had Voldemort found it at all in his exploration of the Malfoy library.

A milky nail thoughtfully traced a diagram of a dying human body in the final stages of being transformed into a ghoul. Voldemort left the old volume open and continued making notes, occasionally checking his figures against several Necromantic texts he had acquired in Egypt. Rain was beginning to stream down the windows, growing fiercer as precipitation crystallised into hail. The Dark Lord shifted comfortably in his chair, listening to the storm crash impotently against the house. Perhaps snow would come soon.

As Voldemort was trying to recall his rusty Demotic, there was a respectful knock at the door. He gestured absent-mindedly with his left hand and the door swung open.

"It is done, milord!" The Dark Lord did not deign to look up from his research as Alecko and Amycus Carrow prostrated themselves before their Master. They were fools, but the breed of fool he had required in this instance. Voldemort had desired a brutality few had the stomach

for. Muggle torture did not generally make the Daily Prophet these days unless it was unusually creative. Entrails adorning the walls, and so forth. Bellatrix had other duties at the moment, as did Greyback, who was busy playing politics with the werewolves. The Carrows had been Voldemort's third choice.

"Very well. Did you bring back the bodies as Lord Voldemort instructed?" the Dark Lord asked, the threat in his icy, susurrant voice causing his servants to tremble.

"Yes, milord!" *My Lord*, Voldemort thought irritably, *two words, you uneducated idiot*. "They're downstairs with freezin' charms on 'em."

"Good," Voldemort shut his books with a flick of his yew wand and stood, impossibly graceful; his obscuring robes almost turning him into another shadow lengthening in the guttering candlelight. His mind awash with experimental formulae and cruel glee, Lord Voldemort glided downstairs to acquaint Mr and Mrs Granger with the latest developments in the Art of Necromancy.

It was shaping up to be a pretty decent day. Hermione and Ron had not yet fallen into their typical bouts of morning bickering, and Snape was missing from the head table. Harry and Ron spent much of breakfast concocting various ailments that would hopefully keep Snape from class that afternoon, while Hermione alternated between looking very disapproving and stifling surprised giggles whenever they invented something particularly gruesome. Harry was actually beginning to feel all right for the first time in weeks - and then Neville walked over to where they sat at the end of the Gryffindor table with a very grave look on his face.

Between the debacle with Rita Skeeter during the Triwizard Tournament and the rubbish that they had printed about Harry last year, none of them really paid much mind to what the *Prophet* had to say anymore, and most of the news past the front page wasn't worth their attention anyway. After all, death, destruction, and Death Eater activity were all front page material, or so they'd assumed. It was a testament to the *Prophet's* poor editorial judgment - or perhaps simply its prejudice, just like every other organized institution in the wizarding world - that the brutal torture and kidnapping of a pair of Muggles would be tucked away in the very back of the paper, sandwiched between 'Ten Ways to Banish a Boggart' and 'Love Advice for Lonely Witches - a column by Marta Plink.'

They read the article in silence, and then once more. A small picture accompanied the piece - a place that had clearly once been a sitting room, with the tattered remains of a couch and a table in splinters on the floor, two wizards poking about the rubble with their wands. A Dark Mark was smeared on the wall; Harry did not need the picture to be in colour to know that it was in blood. A caption below the picture in small print declared that Ministry officials were currently investigating the connection between the Muggle family and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Hermione stared at this picture for a very long time, tracing the lines of the hearth with her finger, her eyes wide and shiny. None of them knew what to say.

"Hermione," Ron said at last, his hand falling on her shoulder. This gentle touch seemed to jerk her out of her reverie; she gave a soft, choked sob, tears spilling forth from her eyes, and she leapt up from the table, fleeing from the Great Hall with the paper still in hand.

"Oh, hell," Ron said, passing a hand over his face, which had gone very pale. He gave Harry a desperate look. "Find Dumbledore. I'll try to calm her down in the meanwhile." He stood up and ran after her, many heads turning from every table as he went racing after Hermione. Harry's chest ached as he watched them go, an odd numbness settling over him. This was no coincidence. Hermione was Harry's best friend, the daughter of two harmless Muggles that had done nothing to threaten any Death Eaters. Voldemort had intentionally sought them out.

Harry stood up, eyes flying across the faces of the head table - but Dumbledore wasn't in his usual seat, nor was he sitting in any of the others. In all of their excitement at Snape's absence, they had failed to notice that Dumbledore was missing as well. Harry's next thought was to go to McGonagall - she would be able to find Dumbledore, she would know what to do - but he faltered when he saw that she was engrossed in conversation with Slughorn, oblivious to the present disturbance within her own house.

Did Harry even want to bring this matter to the headmaster's attention? Dumbledore hid things from Harry constantly, after all. And Voldemort was not attempting to provoke Dumbledore by singling out Hermione's parents. It was Harry who was his target - it was Harry's fault to begin with. And now Voldemort was angry, angry enough to bring harm to Harry's friends. Harry had created this mess, and it was his responsibility to set things right.

Harry found Malfoy in the seventh floor corridor, pacing and looking very distraught. His entire demeanour changed when he caught sight of Harry; the distress in his face was quickly replaced by an angry scowl, his wand in his hand in the blink of an eye.

"Potter."

"I know what you're up to, Malfoy."

"Did that kick to your face rattle your brains too, Potter? I don't know what you're talking about."

Change in tactic, then. It was strange, how easy it was to smile when his heart was pounding so. "Of course you don't. I keep forgetting that your family isn't one of Voldemort's favourites anymore."

Colour rose rapidly to Malfoy's cheeks. "My father is suffering in Azkaban. He is the most loyal follower that the Dark Lord has."

"Which is why Voldemort trusts you with so much, right? I'll bet he doesn't even let your mother serve him his tea."

"Don't you *dare* talk about my mother, Potter - "

"And you?" Baiting Malfoy was one of life's simpler pleasures. "When was the last time Lord Voldemort graced you with his presence? At the going-away gala that he threw for your ever-faithful father? No, wait - I doubt he would set foot anywhere near your slimy house."

Malfoy was snarling, eyes wild and livid. "For your information, Potter, the Dark Lord finds my family home more than worthy enough for his - "

He cut off abruptly, mouth still open, breathing harsh. But he had said enough. Harry was already on his way to the Gryffindor dormitory as Malfoy called after him in a panic. He thought only of the golden snake hidden beneath his pillow, forged from Voldemort's own magic (a number of protective enchantments, to ensure that nothing could damage the vessel carrying a piece of his own soul - except for, perhaps, Voldemort himself). His broom was beneath his four-poster, the quickest way off of Hogwarts grounds. He would need his scarf; it would be a chilly day for a ride.

Narcissa Malfoy looked drawn in the morning light, even copious cosmetic charms could not disguise the attrition in her eyes. Against

the richness of her velvet robes, her face had the aspect of a terrified porcelain doll. She stood in the hall, half-hidden by a statue; pale hair loose around her shoulders - attempting to avoid Lord Voldemort with the hushed stillness of prey. Without her husband and son, she wandered the house like a ghost.

"Narcissa," Voldemort hissed, making her twitch. Her trembling lips were almost as white as his own. "I shall be in the cellar attending to our Muggle guests. If Harry Potter should call, you are to show him in."

"Potter?" she whispered, "How-?" But Lord Voldemort was no longer listening. His trailing cloak lisped against the sumptuous carpet and the gilt-framed ancestral portraits, who had been silenced by his presence, began to murmur in his wake.

Voldemort's bare feet felt cold against the stone floor of the cellar. The Muggles were there as promised, broken and bloodied, their bodies trussed by spells. The man was dead. The Dark Lord approached the two helpless figures, waving his wand slowly to rotate their bodies. Yes, it was possible that, with a little transfiguration, the Grangers might serve Lord Voldemort's purpose.

He began with the standard incantations to create an Inferius, allowing Mrs Granger to watch as he sliced into her husband. But this was no standard reanimation. Mr Granger gurgled and drooled congealing blood as Lord Voldemort systematically vanished his insides until he was little more than a fleshly husk. The cellar was pitch-black, but the Dark Lord had the night vision of a cat. It was only in sudden, painful wandlight that the woman saw flashes of her husband's deconstruction and the evil, white-faced demon who pitilessly desecrated his corpse. But she could hear. Hear the thick ripping of sinew, the sick slick of blood and entrails against stone, the snap of bone, and the flapping of loose skin.

Lord Voldemort worked meticulously. He knew Potter was coming. He knew the Muggle woman watched as he cast spell after spell. But neither was of importance in that instant. To be sure, he longed to sample again the unique sensation of his last, unexpected Horcrux. But that would come.

Dark Magic deepened and pooled - exultant. It was not cruelty which excited him but magic - the promise of such wicked invention thrilled the Dark Lord. He felt neither pleasure nor guilt as Mrs Granger silently thrashed and screamed in the air as he contorted her form -

bending and reshaping her limbs to suit his intention. The scarlet gaze was clinical. If he thought of her at all it was merely that she should be honoured Lord Voldemort allowed such filth as her to be of use to him.

Carefully, almost gently, the yew wand began to dance an intricate weave of power across man and wife, sealing Mrs Granger inside her husband's corpse. He began to test her with the Imperius Curse, putting his experiment through its paces like a colt. Of course, there were errors to be remedied. At first the creature was little but a heap of spasmodic parts. Then it began to slowly move, stumbling, once he'd layered on several locomotive charms. Only then did the Dark Lord laugh, like a child with a new toy, entranced by his own invention as the Muggle's choked, tearful mucus leaked through her husband's dead eyes.

The morning's thick clouds were both a blessing and a burden, concealing Harry's flight from the Muggle world below, but also making it difficult for him to discern exactly where he was in the course of his journey. Every few minutes, he would steer his broom just below the clouds, scouring the countryside for the landmarks Dobby had described to him; twice, Harry had to double back, having overshot the route. By the end of his journey, he had resorted to flying a straight, constant path straight through the clouds, thoroughly soaking himself in the process but ensuring that he would make it to the manor - and to the Grangers - as quickly as possible.

It was with both triumph and dread that Harry watched Malfoy Manor rise up on the horizon. It was right where he'd expected it to be; Dobby had done well. Leaning forward, Harry pushed his Firebolt even harder. Cool cloud vapour clung to his face and ran in rivulets down his cheeks. As Harry descended and touched down just inside the manor's tall, wrought-iron gates, he became aware that his shirt was very damp, his robes heavy with moisture.

The Firebolt was hastily concealed beneath a hedge, followed by his dripping robes, which were weighing him down now that he was on two feet again. Harry shivered in his t-shirt as he made his way down the gravel path, rubbing at his bare arms; there was a definite chill in the air, even this far south. Or perhaps he was simply afraid. He couldn't be certain that Voldemort was even here, yet he was walking right into the home of a known Death Eater. His fingers flexed reassuringly against the golden knife hidden in his pocket, transfigured from the prize Voldemort had given him in the dream.

The Dark Lord had, after all, gone ballistic at the idea of his locket in danger - he would almost certainly give up Hermione's parents if Harry threatened danger to the soul-piece lying in his scar.

Voldemort had been trying to get his attention; this was, if nothing else, a sure-fire way for Harry to get Voldemort's.

His concerns turned out to be for naught. The door swung open before Harry could even touch the handle, and Narcissa Malfoy stood in the threshold, looking terrified but expectant. She ushered him in wordlessly; Harry got one last look at the cloudy grey sunlight before she pushed the door shut behind him.

Narcissa kept as much space between them as possible, as though Harry might attack her at any moment. He looked about the corridor uncertainly; there were no other Death Eaters in sight, and certainly no Voldemort. Harry turned around to ask her about this, but she had already skirted around him and was walking stiffly to a door at the end of the hall.

"Here," she said over her shoulder, her voice little more than a whisper. She pushed open the door to a magnificent drawing room, a great chandelier hanging from the ceiling and huge mullioned windows offering a splendid view of the Malfoy grounds. The very picture of elegance, but it seemed so cold. Harry took a few echoing steps into the drawing room before he realized that Narcissa was no longer following him.

She stood by the door, pointedly refusing to look at him. Harry swallowed, cleared his throat, and said, "I'm here to see -"

"I know." Her voice wavered; she sounded as though she had recently spent a lot of time crying. "Wait here." And then she turned around and ducked nervously back into the hallway, her head bowed, meek as a small mouse. Harry was left alone in the big room with its strange noises, the distant sounds of slapping on stone and faint, breathy groans, the cries of ghosts lurking in the walls. He went to stand by the big windows, easing himself with this illusion of freedom, his fingers in a white-knuckled grip around his wand. He would speak to Voldemort, see what he wanted, and convince him to let Hermione's parents go free unharmed. And if things got bad, Harry would pull out his secret weapon, the knife imbued with Voldemort's own magic, and make his demands. Voldemort would not let him hurt himself, not now that he knew that Harry had a piece of his soul. It would be simple.

He could do this.

Lord Voldemort was adjusting the facial features of the amalgamation. The difficulty was that, while the woman's cries were audible, she needed to move her husband's mouth to complete the transformation. The Dark Lord was mulling over the spell he would have to create in order to achieve such an effect. At the moment the jaw hung dumbly open, its flaccid, dead skin kept lifelike only by a host of preservation charms. Perhaps, when he had perfected the technique, he might even experiment with concealing Nagini within a human corpse...

The floor above creaked and Voldemort shivered as something akin to warm breath shivered across his soul. Potter had come. At first he did not know quite what to do with himself - he felt almost giddy. *Potter had come*. Of course, Lord Voldemort had known he would. But he had assumed it would be harder; that luck and chance - which had so often conspired to keep him from Potter - would attempt to thwart his plans once more.

The creature whimpered helplessly on the floor as Lord Voldemort stepped over it as if it were of no consequence. The Dark Lord took the stairs slowly. His bone-pale, serpentine face twisted in naked avarice; the livid eyes alight - savouring his triumph.

He paused on the verge of opening the door to let his emotions recede behind a wall of cold composure. His features might have been made of marble, his scarlet gaze utterly confident and self-possessed; the forked tongue licking at the edge of his lipless mouth the only sign of his supreme anticipation as the door swung open. "You wished to see me, Harry?" the words slipped out in a breathless, hypnotic susurrus. In thrall to his covetous excitement, he did not think of the blood which speckled his icy skin, stained his silken robes, and painted his feet the colour of his eyes. Voldemort looked every inch the lord out of nightmare.

A shudder ran through Harry at the use of his first name, so foreign and poisonous on that tongue. The fingers of his free hand brushed against the knife in his pocket, a reassurance, before he turned back around, ready to make his demands. But then he saw the blood, and the words got stuck in his throat. He couldn't stop the way his face contorted in horror, his mouth falling open.

"You," he stammered, shock and anger rolling over him, dousing his insides with ice, "you - *what have you done?!*"

His eyes sought the dark corridor behind Voldemort, deliberately avoiding the great red stains soaking the Dark Lord's robes. "You must release them," Harry said, feeling much smaller and infinitely more hopeless than he had only moments ago. Angry tears rushed unbidden to his eyes, and he blinked them away violently; it couldn't be too late, he was going to save them. "I don't know what I've done - I don't know what you want from me - but I'll give it to you, whatever it is. Just - just *please*, you must let them go."

Voldemort looked at his prize cringing and trembling with tears. It was pathetic... *disappointing*. This boy held part of Lord Voldemort inside him - had he expected too much of the child? He missed the spirited Harry who had contested with him in his dreams, who had stood up and fought him in the graveyard. But this, besides being monumentally foolish, was the same poor, pleading prayer the Dark Lord had heard on a hundred desperate lips and it left him utterly unmoved.

"You have come to bargain with Lord Voldemort?" the words tapered off in an amused, incredulous hiss as Voldemort glided around Potter, circling him like a ravenous beast of prey. "What do you possess, Harry Potter, which you have not already given to me? The Muggles had no purpose beyond bringing you here. I have already killed one of them." A long index finger lifted Potter's chin, forcing him to stare up into the Dark Lord's Legilimetic gaze. The connection rippled through his mind and Voldemort's mask dropped as he shuddered with cruel pleasure, revealing the greedy, covetous need beneath.

"This is no dream, you foolish child, you cannot awaken or hide behind Dumbledore." Voldemort leaned closer, closer – until his bleached, marmoreal lips were an inch from Potter's own. "*Tell me...*" he slipped into Parseltongue, the forked tongue brushing the translucent hairs on the boy's cheek. "*Tell me what Harry Potter would offer Lord Voldemort for a woman's life.*"

Harry's heart gave a violent twist. *Hermione's father was dead*. Harry had been too late to save him - but perhaps it wasn't yet too late for her mother. Determination warred with the grief and hatred consuming his heart, and Harry looked down, attempting to steel himself beneath Voldemort's cruel gaze.

An attempt that proved altogether fruitless when a long finger dragged feather-light along his chin. Harry's hand pressed uselessly

against the secret hidden in his pocket. It was of no use now; with Voldemort so close, it would not be an effective threat. And when did he get so close? It shouldn't have been so difficult to think. There was that strange siren's song again, the call of Voldemort's soul reaching out to him through the tips of his fingers - along with something darker, something else altogether. It was confusing, unsettling, the heat that spread through his body from that simple, cold touch.

Harry had been holding his breath. When the unexpected flutter of a forked tongue just barely grazed his skin, however, he exhaled it in a steady whoosh of hot air. His eyelashes fluttered, and he struggled to remember why he was here, to resist the sweet pull of Voldemort's soul from where their skin met at Harry's jawline.

"*Anything*," Harry breathed, an automatic response in Parseltongue, but that was wrong, and Harry flushed as he mind caught up with his mouth. Panic was beginning to join the confusing jumble of emotions churning in Harry's stomach. What did Harry, an ordinary, undignified sixteen-year-old, have to offer Voldemort for another's life? If this had been a dream, a boiling sky and shaking earth would have betrayed Harry's inner turmoil - but this was no dream, and Harry would need to do better than this to win this particular battle.

Harry took a deep, steadying breath and licked his lips, hyper aware of how

(shivery heat and wrong wrong wrong)

near his tongue came to brushing against the Dark Lord's mouth.

"You wanted me here," Harry said a little breathlessly, in English this time, his lips still moving so close to Lord Voldemort's own. "I'm not stupid. You went out of your way to find and kidnap the family of my friend - Muggles, no less. It couldn't have been a simple task locating them." He was surprised by how calm he sounded; if his heart hadn't been racing, his eyes as wide as a Boggart caught naked in broad daylight, perhaps his performance might have even been convincing. "There must be something that you want." *Please, please let there be something that you want.*

"*But I have what I want*," Voldemort's sibilant voice was spun silk, refusing to follow Potter back into English. This was his unique gift as the last of Slytherin's line - proof that the boy belonged to him alone. Sacred, intimate hisses lightly stroked their faces with breath. The anguine tongue extended, tasting fear, hope, grief, and the musky

scent of arousal. One spidery hand caressed Potter's jaw, while the other silently reached into Potter's pocket and acquired a certain holly and Phoenix feather wand, which vanished beneath the Dark Lord's clever fingers. Those green irises drew him like a moth to a flame.

He did not understand half of the emotions spilling from Potter, but devoured them greedily, as if the boy were a desert-ringed oasis. And he wanted to... *touch* him, to swim in this deep reservoir of feeling. The reptilian tongue snaked into the corner of Potter's mouth, trying to discover the secrets therein. An overwhelming bolt of connection which made Voldemort quiver with desire... *"You have delivered yourself to me, Harry. It is over. You have lost."*

Harry should have been frightened. He should have been scared out of his wits. Voldemort was right - it was just like with Sirius, only Dumbledore was not here this time to clean up Harry's mess. And yet Harry could only stand there, quivering like a plucked string. He could not have moved away if he wanted to... and, *"Oh,"* he didn't want to - he wanted to close the thrumming space between them, to crawl inside of Voldemort and bathe in this electric pleasure until his body sang with it, to discover the promise in the cool brush of those fingers.

"No," he whispered brokenly, but it sounded suspiciously like the English for *yessss*.

Hands came up to Voldemort's chest, and, really, they'd meant to push him away, but they got caught up somewhere in the silky material of the Dark Lord's robes, and instead they simply rested uselessly against the flat planes of his chest, disobedient and traitorous. It was terrifying and confusing, that he simultaneously could wish for less cloth between them (and more skin, oh, more of that wonderful, heady sensation) and also more of something, anything between them - that perhaps a wall might fall from the sky and separate the dangerous heat that held their bodies so close and end this madness.

He was dimly aware that his fingers were touching blood, still wet against his hands. It was this reminder alone that prevented coherence from fleeing entirely when Lord Voldemort's tongue licked the corner of Harry's lips, a chain reaction that set off an explosion of fire in his belly and weakened his already trembling knees.

"Me," he breathed, struggling to remain in English, failing every few words, *"you can have me. I can let you ... touch me. I - you - want to."* And Harry could see that he wanted to, that Lord Voldemort was just

as much a prisoner to this strange, dangerous compulsion as Harry was. He could see it in his eyes - red-black-hot flame, devouring Harry whole; he could feel it in the air that throbbed and shifted between them.

Some instinct in the back of Voldemort's mind was entreating him to stop: that he was becoming too embroiled in Potter's flesh and sinking into the boy's thoughts like suffocating quicksand. But his tongue was tracing and tearing at the pink, liminal skin - circling that heated orifice. Voldemort could feel his soul trembling in Potter's shallow breaths, feel it beating in the heart which pulsed madly like that of a rodent caught between the jaws.

The Dark Lord had no context for such delirious pleasure. *You can have me. I can let you ... touch me. I - you - want to.* All he could do was smother himself across Potter's senses, his claws rending the boy's garments, his mouth eagerly devouring saliva, scent, emotion - anything. All the messy, base lust of humanity, from which Voldemort had held aloof for almost seventy years, deluged his broken mind and the Dark Lord lost control.

He invaded the unresisting green eyes and coiled himself, like the parasite he had been, around memories of fleeting happiness and desire. Sharp teeth drew blood and cries lost between pain and pleasure from Potter's mouth. Voldemort was as mesmerised and greedy as a starved Dementor, almost lifting Potter into the air as he fed off the vicious, demented, needful kiss. *"Mine,"* was the serpentine mantra that pounded in his icy blood. *"Mine,"* was the exultation between two halves of the same severed soul. And *"Mine,"* was the word that slithered, ecstatic, between their lips until that too was lost to delirium.

Harry had been kissed before, but only once. Cho Chang's mouth had been soft against his clumsy lips, and the taste of her tears had clung to his tongue afterward, the only remarkable thing about the entire experience.

He saw now that had not been a real kiss - or perhaps... perhaps this wasn't really kissing, this demanding, primal dance of lips and tongue and teeth that was so intense it nearly blinded him.

But, no - Lord Voldemort *was* kissing him. He seemed to only have the brain capacity to process this single reality. Lord Voldemort was *kissing* him. It was a very strange thing, to be both thrilled and

terrified in the same moment, confusion making his head spin almost as much as the kiss itself.

Thrilled, and terrified... and suddenly, helplessly aroused, more so than he had ever been in his entire life.

Shudders coursed through Harry's body like hot liquid, small whimpers torn unwillingly from his throat as Voldemort's teeth tore against his lips. Their mouths were a tangle of heat, the broken shard of soul in Harry's heart blazing with pleasure and desire with every rough swipe of Voldemort's tongue. His fingers scrabbled loosely at Voldemort's arms, attempting desperately to hold himself upright, his muscles a jumble of hot jelly inside his limbs - but it was a needless effort. The Dark Lord had hold of him so tightly that Harry couldn't have escaped even if he'd wanted to.

Lord Voldemort was everywhere. Around him, against him, inside him - really, truly inside of him, a violent force that ripped through his mind with the same intensity that Voldemort's mouth and teeth ripped at Harry's swollen lips, feeding off of and stoking the fire within him. Body curving up into the Dark Lord's, Harry pushed back against the visceral assault on his senses - and wasn't this appropriate, that this would simply be another battle between them, a contest of wills and magic? *This is wrong*, a part of Harry's mind insisted distantly, but the thought was lost to Voldemort's fingers and mouth, peeling him apart with sensation. Another stroke against his tongue, like magic rubbing raw against his soul, and Harry made a treacherous noise, low and keening and needy that was not altogether lost in Voldemort's mouth.

Voldemort was no stranger to intimacies of thought and memory. To the Dark Lord, minds were as pliable as flesh. To a Legilimens who could rip lightning fast through intention, who had lingered as a formless thing, possessing and spinning thoughts within thoughts like spidersilk, trussing lesser creatures until they were but slaves to his will, and who drank sanity like water, Voldemort had no fear of his own pitiless, iron-scaled will being penetrated.

He basked in Potter's reeling recollections - the two of them knocking over a gilded side table as they crashed to the floor with a shattering of glass, the slip of liquid, and the scattering of Narcissa's white roses - and felt Potter push back against his assault, fighting to reach into Voldemort's own fathomless hunger as the Dark Lord tore into his.

Voldemort did not think of love, or even coitus. He wanted to break,

ensnare, and possess. He stroked and murmured as he would to a Horcrux and lashed out as he would at any recalcitrant mind refusing submission. Any goal he might have had was lost in a contest of feral domination.

The boy gave a moan that seemed to echo through Voldemort's writhing body as he fought Potter to the floor, capturing his wrists, pressing them into the ornate carpet, and biting as much flesh as he could find. Yet as Voldemort pushed and pushed, determined to conquer Potter - in thrall to the brutal instinct to claim and rule - the more the child slipped into his own consciousness.

It was like that inexplicable contest in the graveyard, Phoenix song winding into his terrified spirit; despite his fierce, unshakable resolve, the boy gained ground - beads of dizzying light pulsing toward his magic until his wand screamed with their scorching brilliance. He did not understand it, but still he held on, determined in his quest for utter possession of the seraphic emotions of this young creature, even as his Occlumentic shields broke and Voldemort's own raw thoughts spun and eddied with the presence of Potter's questing power. Voldemort trembled and cried out into those bleeding lips - helpless and hypnotised all at once as he felt the boy's pleasure exult in the breach.

Harry was fighting now, fighting as much as he was writhing, struggling against the liquid electricity that threatened to keep his mind and body captive. Lord Voldemort easily overcame him physically - his grip around Harry's wrists was unwavering - but Harry was advancing in the battlefield of their minds, his magic and his spirit shoving violently back against Voldemort's mental invasion. And, to his considerable surprise, he felt the Dark Lord's resolve begin to give way. The dark essence of Voldemort's thoughts - greed and desire and sudden, violent panic - meshed and swirled with Harry's own, filling him, consuming him -

Harry, a jumble of heated limbs flushed with arousal, breathing heavily on the floor. Death in horrifying numbers, the shadows of bodies spinning in a dark room, an older man with Tom Riddle's face crumpling to the ground. Slicing into dead, limp flesh; awful, manic excitement devoid of happiness - vivid fantasies of his own body, bent at unnatural angles, covered in blood and bruises - transforming into burning, possessive desire...

It was somehow as pathetic as it was appalling. Harry was reminded of the dream in Little Hangleton, the way Voldemort had trembled in

his arms and Harry's inexplicable need to soothe and comfort him through his nightmare. The Dark Lord's fingers were shaking against Harry's wrists now, fear and fury paralyzing him as Harry swarmed through Voldemort's mind.

And beneath the pull of Voldemort's soul on his own, beneath the powerful instinct to flee this monster's thoughts, was the absurd and unexpected urge to pacify the trembling creature above him. Harry pried his hands from Voldemort's loosened fingers and gently peeled off a rose petal from the Dark Lord's face. Hesitantly, he ran his fingers along Voldemort's jaw until they reached the back of his neck; tingling warmth flowed from his fingertips where they made contact with pale, translucent skin.

The fingers seemed to infect Voldemort's skin with warmth. They were sticky with sweat which clung to the sharp angle of his jaw and the porcelain curve of his neck. Voldemort hated to be touched; he loathed the crude gestures and embraces that passed between even his Death Eaters. The last time a human hand had touched his face was in 1947 when that fat, old hag had pinched his cheek.

But this felt nothing like that at all. It was sunlight against his frail, chilled skin. The crimson eyes were glazed and as wide and wondering as a child's, the lipless gash of a mouth - smudged blue-purple-red with bruises and blood - forming a hapless 'O' of shock. How nice they felt, those tender digits brushing across his nape. How *right*. Voldemort sighed into the caress, his eyelids fluttering shut as he leaned into Potter's touch.

The moment was as perfect and fleeting as a snitch. He saw fingers that were not his own closing... closing around the golden bauble - and then his heart seemed to contract and the Dark Lord felt sick to his stomach. His face contorted with a snarl of repulsion and, even though his features were as smooth as melted wax, he looked like an ancient, wild creature, infinitely scarred and wearied by hatred. He wanted to pull away, to bury himself beneath the layers of black malice that had shielded him for as long as he could remember. Voldemort ground his teeth and hissed dangerously, but he didn't have the strength to part himself from Potter's hand.

"No." The word slipped out on its own as Harry tightened his grip on the Dark Lord's neck. That brief, wonderful taste of hope on his tongue was replaced by rusty blood, calling him back to reality - but reality

was full of cold and death, and the skin beneath his fingers made Harry warm, so warm.

"Don't you feel it?" Harry asked, his voice rough and very small. The warmth of their connection guided his fingers to Voldemort's ear, where they traced it tenderly, rubbed the space just behind it. The touch sent pleasant shivers up Harry's forearm. "It's brilliant," he added softly, wonderingly. "Don't stop, not yet."

Never mind that this was *Lord Voldemort*; never mind that he might feel disgusted and ashamed when he remembered himself again. Harry couldn't imagine such negativity while the liquid pleasure of their connection still pulsed through his veins. The world was reduced to a single point of contact - to Voldemort's warm exhales against his thumb, to the light that had fled so readily from those crimson eyes.

A clawed hand reached tentatively, experimentally out to stroke Potter's cheek and trail along his forehead. The base of each wickedly sharp talon was darkly blue, as though Voldemort were suffering from hypothermia. The large, spidery fingers, with their grossly obvious knuckles and startlingly clear veins, looked utterly wrong against Potter's young skin.

"Brilliant..." Voldemort repeated softly, sadly, and his breathy, high-pitched voice had never seemed more unnatural or less frightening as he allowed himself to be gentled by the warmth that caressed his ear and was now stroking his hairless skull. A white finger traced the scar that bound them, as Voldemort lingered for a few last, glorious moments in the friction between the two eager pieces of his soul, which sang with beautiful abandon, resonating through the scant sliver of spirit left inside him, purring into Potter's touch.

Then Lord Voldemort jerked away, furious at the pain and gaping loss which instantly engulfed him, like black, arctic water. Part of him wanted to grab Potter again, to hold him forever, never to let go. *Weakness*, was the cruel whisper through his mind that made him curl up, clutching himself like a miserable child. *Weakness...*

I am not weak! He struggled against the mocking voices and his forlorn soul still crying for the boy. *I am Lord Voldemort!* It gave him the strength to stand, his livid eyes dull and angry, and conceal his uncertainty behind a façade of control. The only clue to his churning emotions were the slits of his flat, serpentine nostrils flaring and contracting with breathless rapidity.

Harry was left panting and cold on the floor. Voldemort's touches could no longer distract him, and the slow return to sentience was painful. Harry winced as he noticed a harsh stinging in his lips, a sharp pain in his arm where he had been sliced by the broken vase. But even more painful was the loss of physical contact, a craving in his scar that was so unlike the searing pain with which he was so familiar. There was a dull ache in the centre of his being, like the empty wound a knife leaves when it has been plunged into and then withdrawn from one's abdomen.

But the swirling darkness of Voldemort's thoughts did not leave him with the Dark Lord's touch. In fact, his link to the Voldemort's mind seemed to be even stronger. Bits of foreign fury and self-loathing slipped in and out of Harry's thoughts, and as he focused, he saw that he could grab hold of each feeling and - pushing further - see what exactly had inspired it.

And what Harry found was terrifying and confusing. Hateful, jeering voices ridiculed Voldemort for the comfort he had found in Harry's touch. A dark, malicious force lingered in Voldemort's mind, crying, 'weakness,' over and over again, pelting him with the word like so many stones.

Harry stood up slowly, despite the protesting ache in his shoulders. He was careful not to place either of his palms on the shards of glass that littered the floor as he climbed to his feet. Harry's heart was pounding as he approached the Dark Lord. He must be mad. He ought to be fleeing for his life while Lord Voldemort had his back turned. And yet his fingers hovered just inches from Voldemort's shoulder blade, nearly following through with the bizarre impulse to rub his back and draw him back into Harry's arms.

But Harry's hand faltered and, after a moment, dropped to his side, fingers barely brushing the Dark Lord's robes. Bitterness at Voldemort's anger, at the supreme irony of their situation, surged over him. "Wanting happiness isn't weakness." The words came out harsher than he'd intended them to. Harry softened his voice, his fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides. "You're only weak because you're afraid of it."

You're weak. Voldemort screamed - an eldritch, inhuman shriek - and then the yew wand whipped through the air to crush the scornful voices; to prove that he, Lord Voldemort, was afraid of nothing and no one. "*You dare...?*" the Dark Lord whispered, suddenly quiet and very

still.

And, as he stared furiously into that defiant, evergreen gaze, Voldemort felt the familiar burn of wrathful Dark magic building under his skin and the sense of rightness it had always brought him: "*Crucio!*"

The boy cried out as the spell hit, screaming as it contorted his body, rolling and writhing over wet carpet, damp thorns and broken glass. His thin clothes bloomed with blood. Voldemort watched avidly, laughing softly - humourless and insane - as the torture vanquished the voices as it had always done, funnelling all his fear and fury into another's searing agony. *I am Lord Voldemort! I have no fear!* "It is *you* who are weak, Harry, not I," he murmured, bending over the boy as he finally deigned to end the unforgivable curse.

Potter blinked up at him. His green eyes were wide and naked without his glasses, which had flown off while he had been flailing across his bed of glass. "Happiness... isn't weakness," he rasped. "Fear... isn't weakness. And I... I feel... *sorry* for you."

The hairless brow raised as Voldemort stared down at the gasping, bleeding boy, his lipless mouth curling. "Which of us is more to be pitied? Lord Voldemort or the injured, wandless child at his feet?" The Dark Lord smiled, taut and wicked, and his magic levitated Potter into the air, floating above the debris at the yew wand's command, almost as though underwater.

Potter was his Horcrux, his possession. He had no need of the boy's assistance, pity, or mistaken affections. Lord Voldemort had never needed a single soul - not even his own. His secret and self-contained nature rejected any suggestion of kindness, attributing Potter's actions

(-stroking his jaw, whisper-light... the gentlest of touches to the nape of his neck-)

to some failed, stillborn manipulation on Potter's part.

Cold anger iced over the chasm left by their momentary connection. Voldemort quickly checked that he had inflicted no major damage to the skin which housed his treasure, cast a spell to staunch Potter's bleeding and, with an elegant flick of the yew wand, he hurled the boy viciously down the stone tunnel to the cellar, slamming the door behind him with a second, furious flick.

A third gesture and the room was put to rights, even as he heard

Potter hit stone with a pained cry. Voldemort stood, still breathing heavily through his slitted nostrils, glaring murder at the hidden door. Then he turned on his heel and strode out of the drawing room in a towering fury. Potter would *beg* for his forgiveness before he was through. *And Lord Voldemort did not forgive.*

Part III

Harry bounced down the stairs like a limp rag doll, his already aching limbs screaming with every smack of his body against the stone steps. Once, twice, three times - and then he was skidding across the cellar floor on his shoulder, crying out hoarsely, his body throbbing with pain so intense it was nauseating.

He lay like this for a very long time, broken and struggling to breathe in the near-darkness. There was a large welt growing on his head, hot and thumping along to his racing pulse; he would not be surprised to learn that his hair was matted with blood. He could not remember ever feeling so damaged - not that time in the graveyard, not even that time he had fallen off his broomstick in the middle of a Quidditch match. No - the pain had stopped just short enough to leave him conscious, even if just barely, so that he could appreciate every jolt and stab of agony that rippled through his crippled body.

He was not sure how long this went on. He might have forgotten those moments altogether, one bleeding into the next slowly, torturously, as the pain began to recede somewhat in his sore limbs. But what he would remember later, lying in bed while sleep evaded him, or looking at Hermione's wet cheeks and shining eyes - what he would remember was the noise.

It stretched out from the darkness, like the sound of a nightmare given voice, joining his ragged breaths in the cold silence of the cellar. It was the long, terrible wail of a wounded animal, interspersed with sickening gurgles and ragged intakes of breath. It was heartbreaking and pathetic and terrifying, all wrapped up in the same sound. It would haunt Harry's dreams for many years to come.

The boy struggled to sit up, head thudding painfully in protest. Terror gripped him as the moaning began again, louder this time - although, now that Harry was listening, really listening, it sounded like it was almost muffled, as though from behind a thick cloth. He squinted his eyes - his glasses were gone, left upstairs in the rubble of their tussle - but it was of no use; the room was shrouded in complete darkness. Even if he hadn't been blind, he wouldn't have been able to see a thing - but somehow, even without his eyesight, he knew to whom those awful groans belonged, the thing which shared his claustrophobic prison.

His legs refused to hold him; he did not even make it halfway to his

feet. And so he went on his hands and knees, shuffling slowly, bones and muscles aching equally from the Cruciatus and from his fall down the stone staircase. Once, he slipped on something wet and pulpy, soft and warm beneath his fingers; he plowed forward, refusing to think about what he had just touched - or the rotten, horrible smell that was slowly infecting the air as he inched closer, following the muffled whimpers. The stench grew stronger the nearer that he got, but Harry couldn't stop himself from moving; a sick fascination had taken hold of him, alongside the ridiculous notion that he could somehow help whatever - or, he swallowed, whoever - it was that was crying so pathetically across the room.

He went to take another venturing step with his hand, but instead of meeting stone - slick with that warm, gooey mess or otherwise - his fingers met with something slimy and cold. He recoiled immediately, even as there was sudden movement beside him, a horrible shriek that split his ears. Harry could distinguish terror in the cries - but this realization was lost in the hot, reeking breath against his face, a spasming, sticky limb that jerked into his knee, almost making him lose his balance. He nearly cried out and stumbled backward, stomach churning with revulsion, heart pounding furiously - and then the cry was ripped right from his throat when there was a loud pop, like the cracking of a large joint, directly next to his ear.

"Harry - Harry Potter, sir?"

Big, green eyes blinked at him in the darkness. Harry gaped, shock and horror making it difficult for him to think. A small hand reached out and touched his face.

"Dobby?" Harry's voice was very rough; there was still blood in his mouth.

"Harry Potter hadn't returned to Hogwarts castle - Harry Potter's friends were beginning to worry, and - and Dobby knows Harry Potter said not to tell anyone where he went, sir, but - but Dobby knew that Harry Potter was in danger."

Harry's mind was reeling with confusion, but there was no time for questions. "Dobby," he panted, "can you get me out of here?"

The hand grasped the bloody cloth of his shirt. "Dobby can do anything Harry Potter wants, sir - anything at all."

"Wait," Harry gasped as he was jerked onto his knees by Dobby's grip. "Wait, we need to -" Stomach turning, he reached out blindly, finger

grasping the clammy, chilly limb that had thrown itself at him just moments before. It trembled beneath his fingers, but did not make any move to jerk away; perhaps it had used all of its strength trying to knock Harry over. "We ... we need to - to save her -"

Somehow understanding, Dobby - good Dobby, sweet Dobby - obediently reached out his other hand, grabbed hold of the whimpering, stinking creature on the ground. There was a rush of magic - his poor, aching body was being squeezed through a narrow tube, into one small, compressed, painful point of existence - and then he was dazzled with sunlight, so bright he had to squeeze shut his eyes, the soft, pleasant texture of a carpet against his fingers.

Harry sat up, saw the remains of Mr. Granger's disfigured, oozing corpse, and was sick all over Dumbledore's office floor.

Seething as the ornate door slammed behind him, Lord Voldemort strode up the corridor, rolling his wand deftly between his fingers as he walked. Around him fumed an ebon nebula of poisonous magic which spat and hissed like burning ozone. The Malfoy portraits shuddered and hid behind their gilt frames as the corrosive darkness brushed past the charms which kept the old oil paintings animate.

A stout, sour-lipped dowager peeked bravely out from behind her frame. "Some people ought to learn to control their tempers!" she muttered, flustered, but refusing to be cowed. The yew wand moved lightning fast and there was an awful bang. As Voldemort glided on without breaking his stride, all that remained of her once-lovely garden scene was a scorched, smoking mess.

I have the boy. Whatever Harry Potter's plan had been, it had failed. Perhaps he had become too accustomed to seeing the Dark Lord in dreams, or in the Headmaster's office, and forgotten what it was to be in Voldemort's power without Dumbledore to shield him. The scant, colourless mouth quirked in chilly satisfaction as Voldemort dipped for a moment into Potter's mind and felt panic and black, blood-slicked horror.

Entering the library, the Dark Lord began to pace distractedly. The rain had abated and winter sunshine poured in the wide, arcing French windows, illuminating the ruby eyes and the icy pallor of the gaunt, pensive features. Lord Voldemort recalled Potter's frozen, blank-faced shock in the Ministry of Magic, his wand useless at his side. If Dumbledore had not intervened, Voldemort would have

destroyed a piece of his own soul. In fact, the number of times the Dark Lord had almost killed Potter (O, irony of ironies!) were myriad. But there was something about that moment when Potter ceased haranguing Bellatrix and stared, his hoarse voice caught in his throat.

It was a common thing, the frozen stare of a creature ambushed by death. But Potter had given Voldemort the same gaze again today, lying bloodied on the floor, surrounded by glistening glass. The green eyes, naked without their spectacles, had held such pure shock. It only made Voldemort more infuriated - to think that Harry Potter had expected him to be a merciful lord after offering such gross insult! The thought sent him back to anger; that Potter had dared to offer him pity. He stewed and seethed, black cloak whirling as he paced.

Eventually, Voldemort sat down, dark silk robes whispering as he settled himself on the rich velvet of the library sofa - more to prove that he could rather than anything else - trying to becalm his mind. He had no need to be so affected, after all. Where another wizard might have pinched the bridge of his nose, Voldemort brought up a long-fingered hand to cradle the high cheekbones that spread from his warped, flat profile like sharp wings. The enticing reality of Potter's capture unfolded within him, days stretching out before that greedy, pitiless gaze. Ophic nostrils quivered beneath his palm, dilating in excitement as he lifted his face from his hand. *Had not Lord Voldemort promised, on the night of his rebirth, to instruct Potter in the virtue of obedience?* A soft, mirthless chuckle disturbed the quiet of the library as –

(the green, bulging eyes and squeaky voice of an elf and overwhelming hope was beating in the agony of his glass-shredded chest)

And Voldemort was off, almost scrambling, his white feet barely touching the floor as he flew like smoke on the wind, all but disappearing into racing, billowing shadow. He could not apparate within the confines of the manor itself, but Lord Voldemort could move as no mortal wizard could. He shed humanity and sped; a headlong, furious, desperate flight down, down, down past the stone tunnel - skidding on the bloody stones of the cellar as he screamed in rage.

He shrieked with wild, impotent fury, brilliant green light sparking out the end of his wand. Potter and the Muggle had vanished. How had the little beast gotten past the wards? How was it that he – *Lord Voldemort* – had been thwarted once more by Harry Potter? It was too much to bear. Something akin to betrayal burned in his gut as tears of

fury pooled behind the slitted crimson eyes; lashless, reptilian lids trapping them ruthlessly back.

The Dark Lord did not recall much of what happened next, only that the world turned as red as his own bloody gaze as rage swallowed him utterly. Voldemort could not count the curses he cast; the tortures he visited upon all who crossed his path. He found sleep only in the small hours close to dawn, shivering and exhausted with wrath, yet still raw and unable to think though the vice of its mad grip upon his senses. Even Nagini brought him no comfort. His skeletal limbs curled tightly together under the covers, but the heating charms suffocated without truly warming. Closing his lurid eyes, the Dark Lord stroked his cold fingers unthinkingly - repeatedly, compulsively - along his jaw and the back of his neck until the nails at the end of the tense digits began to break the frail skin.

Sleep did not bring Harry any comfort. His dreams were a blur of pain and shattering glass, someone else's anger red-hot in his stomach. Over and over, a hooded figure with glowing scarlet eyes bent down to kiss his lips, and Harry swayed on his feet, unable to flee; but the hand that touched his cheek was that of a skeleton, of a Dementor that tried to suck out his soul through his mouth and then dissected his empty corpse like a Muggle scientist. A mirror in front of his face, and the festering, shriveled face of Mr. Granger stared back at him through the dirty glass, grinning with rotted teeth. Snakes slithered out of his empty, bleeding eye sockets, his dangling jaw. "*Mine*," they hissed as they wrapped around his throat, pressing against his trachea, choking him. "*Mine, mine, mine.*"

Harry awoke with a great gasp of cool air, only scarcely containing a shout. He sat up painfully, half-expecting to find himself still trapped in that terrible prison that stank of blood and decay, at the mercy of a crazed murderer. But no - he was only in the hospital wing, the familiar, white cotton sheets cool and crisp against his bare arms and legs. The blurry room was awash with moonlight; it was well past midnight, and, by all appearances, he was alone.

Slowly and with great care, Harry lifted his arms in front of his face to inspect the extent of his injuries. The shards of glass had been plucked carefully from his skin, the cuts and slices healed magically and then smeared with another healing salve - to prevent scarring, Harry recalled Madame Pomfrey explaining during one of Harry's many previous visits to this very bed. Harry raised a hand to his mouth, which was tingling very strangely; his fingers met with even more

salve, cool and wet against his fingers. He flushed as he recalled exactly what had happened to require the use of healing ointment on his lips.

"Ah, Harry - awake at last." The voice made him jump, and Harry turned skittishly to his left, where he saw movement from the corner of his blurry vision. Not alone after all, then - and just the person that Harry did not want to see. The boy's cheeks burned with guilt as he looked at his lap, silent. He avoided Dumbledore's gaze as the man stood up from a chair.

"I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that Mrs. Granger is being treated for her injuries at St. Mungo's," Dumbledore said, approaching Harry's bedside. Harry looked up at this, confused.

"But Mr. Granger - "

" - has been returned to his family for proper burial," finished Dumbledore. "Mrs. Granger was ... extracted from his corpse shortly after you arrived in my office this morning. It was a situation unprecedented at St. Mungo's, but the Healers are working to the best of their abilities to set things right."

Even with Dumbledore's gentle language, Harry's insides still did another flip-flop that made him worry for the contents of his stomach. Dumbledore seemed to sense this, for he summoned his chair so that he could sit at eye-level with the boy in the bed, changing the topic.

"I dearly wish that you had consulted me before running off to confront Lord Voldemort, Harry."

Harry's nausea was replaced by his guilt, which returned to gnaw at him with a vengeance. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He looked away. "He didn't want you, sir. He wanted me."

"Of course he wanted you," Dumbledore said, not unkindly. There was a note of weariness in his voice. "And he wouldn't have let you go if Dobby hadn't come any sooner than he did."

There was a pause in which Harry continued to study the cotton fibers of the bed sheets, and Dumbledore continued to study Harry with ice-blue eyes, just as piercing as the Dark Lord's red. Harry was briefly grateful that he did not have his spectacles to help him discern his headmaster's gaze.

"Harry... You must understand by now why Lord Voldemort did not

kill you today."

Familiar, hurtful anger flared up inside Harry's heart. "Yes - no thanks to you."

A sigh; as expected, Dumbledore did not take the bait. "Then you understand now that it is more important than ever to keep you from Voldemort's clutches. A life as Lord Voldemort's Horcrux, kept alive just for the sake of feeding his soul, is not the one that I'd ever envisioned for you. You must not go looking for Voldemort again, Harry, no matter the consequences he leads you to believe your resistance should entail."

"Horcrux." Harry tasted the word in his mouth wonderingly; he imagined that he could feel the Dark magic that clung to his soul shiver in response. "Is that what I am, then?"

"Not for long," Dumbledore said softly, and he stood up. "Back to bed, Harry. Ms. Granger will have returned to Hogwarts tomorrow. I daresay that she will need her friends more than ever in the morning; but tonight, you must rest."

"Goodnight, sir," Harry said, his voice small. He did not watch Dumbledore leave. It was at least an hour before he drifted back off to sleep again, lost in self-loathing and guilt; the word *Horcrux* whispered over and over in his mind like a death sentence.

It was hot in the house; a fetid, lingering heat that stifled the dust-laden air. A dirty window, high above, was open to let in the night breeze and a sliver of moonlight. Voldemort recognised the smell of decay and the pain that enervated his feeble, infantine body. The fire was dying, its embers glowing faintly in the darkness.

It was such an effort to move, such an effort to breathe in this heavy heat that seemed to weigh upon his tiny chest like so much lead. "Nagini!" he cried into the filthy gloom, "Wormtail!"

But no one came. He began to fight the black fabric that swaddled his brittle limbs, calling until his raw throat could do no more than hiss abjectly. His wand had gone. If he stayed here, if no one fed him, he would return to the agonies of formlessness. And even this, this shameful, exhausting, homunculist form, was preferable to existing as an evanid sliver of spirit devoid of any power but possession.

Where was Nagini, where was his servant? In the oppressive silence, the only noise was Voldemort's desperate, fretful stirring as he struggled to free himself from the material. Had Wormtail grown weary of nursing this disgusting, child-like body and fled into the night like the cowardly rat he was? But what of Nagini? Surely she would not abandon him so? "*Nagini...*" the high voice whispered feebly, "*Nagini...!*"

He fell from the armchair, flailing, hitting the floor with a drawn-out hiss of agony. But the mouldy hearth rug was gone, replaced by dry leaves, which fluttered around him. The walls seemed to rustle and seethe, as though the ivy which covered the roof had found its way inside, creeping over the peeling wallpaper. The room writhed with foliage as old and gnarled as the house itself, unseen creatures murmuring in the vine-clotted darkness.

Voldemort's frangible, foetal body could not even crawl. The spindly arms and legs were long and skeletal, lacking the flesh of a real child. The crouched, emaciated thing emerged slowly, painstakingly, from its dark wrappings. He could barely lift his own lengthy limbs; too heavy for the tiny body. Naked - flayed, black-red skin burning - Voldemort weakly shuffled and flapped and struggled to move.

Wormtail had said there was a little more potion: a trickle of glistening blood and poison at the bottom of a glass bottle. It seemed so far away, up on the table, so very far away. He had to focus just to draw air into his tired, fragile lungs. They felt like two great, painful bellows he had to keep pumping. Voldemort blinked - beyond exhausted - trying to keep his avid, red eyes open as he stared up at the gleaming container above. The silvery glint made his mouth water with febrile greed, his lipless mouth gaping open like a sticky, newly-hatched bird. His need was infinite.

The helpless fingers, trapped beneath him, twitched, sending up a lash of desperate, wandless magic; trying to bring the container down to his gasping throat, his tongue. It spun for a long moment on the edge of the table, as if dizzy, and then fell. The glass shattered and silver cracked into red, dripping from the broken remains of the bottle. Voldemort extended his forked tongue needfully along a jagged piece, eager for the merest trace of Nagini's milk, but there was only pain and the metallic taste of blood. The creature mirrored in the moonlit, scattered shards was hideous. Its raw, squamous flesh and flat, evil face looked half-finished, stunted and incomplete. It thrashed and whimpered uselessly, licking at the glass until the ugly flesh opened and it began to bleed, seeping and smearing red across its myriad

reflections and the brown, crumpled leaves.

And then Voldemort heard it - the sound of something moving through the trees - and the Dark Lord, faint with hunger, tried to roll and scrabble feverishly – losing strength with every effort – concealing himself as best he could under the ancient armchair, camouflaged by the leaves which stuck to his raw flesh. He could not go back. Not now, not after coming so close. He hoped: *let it not be the aurors - please, please let it be Wormtail, let it be Nagini - let fortune favour Lord Voldemort - please, please...*

The staircase always terrified him.

Foreboding and rotten, it looked like it might jump out at him and gobble him up, steps for teeth, dust and filth for choking saliva. It was the beginning of that horrible nightmare that he'd been having since he was fourteen, the one that he could not control no matter his knowledge of the outcome, the one that always ended in consuming green light and terror. But tonight, the staircase merely sat there, dark, decrepit, and entirely harmless. It did not compel him to traverse its rotted steps; in fact, Harry noticed with a jolt of surprise, he did not have the usual walking stick in hand, nor were his fingers the wrinkled and veiny digits of the Muggle that usually haunted this particular dream.

And the strange, irresistible urge to climb to the top of the staircase was all his own.

So Harry did. His first step, however, was not muffled by dust; he looked down and noticed, with that detached sense of realization that is quite particular to dreams, that the stairs were coated with dry, dead leaves instead. Crunch, crunch went his trainers with every step; and the closer he got to the top, the stronger the call became.

He was no longer in a manor now, but a forest thick with trees, air heavy with humidity and moonlight. A little ways into the forest, and the dreaded staircase had vanished behind him, nearly forgotten. Harry could easily get lost among these trees, but he was dimly aware of some higher purpose guiding his steps; there was something that had called him here, to this precise moment. He made his way through the wood, directed by glimpses of moonlight that illuminated his path, ears straining for any hint of movement in the undergrowth ...

And there - a distant smash of glass across the ground, not so far away

from him (Harry's skin prickled all over at the noise, a ghost of a memory that he couldn't quite pin down). Soft, desperate whimpers followed the shattering, the barest crackling of dry leaves on the forest floor that indicated a thrashing body. Harry launched forward as he thought he recognized the cries for a child's, heart pounding furiously. This was why he had been called here - something needed his help and he, Harry, could help save it. He strained his eyes through the shadows of the trees, moonlight slipping in and out of sight as the barest of breezes stirred the branches.

He emerged rather suddenly in a clearing; the whimpers ceased just as abruptly. An armchair sat in the middle of the glade, ivy growing up and around its arms and legs. Lying beside it was the source of the smash he had heard: a glass bottle lay in several pieces on the forest floor, although Harry could not make out the liquid it had held, even with the help of the moonlight. But what interested Harry was not the broken flask, or even the armchair, but the quiet, frightened rasping that was coming from beneath the leafy throne.

"Hello?" There was no answer, only the barest of rustling, another large, scraping intake of breath. Trepidation began to worm its way into Harry's chest, returning from its brief flight during his stroll through the forest. Ignoring his misgivings, however, Harry walked over to the armchair, stepping on a shard of the bottle as he went.

The wheezing was definitely coming from beneath the armchair. Harry found himself suddenly afraid - the hoarse breathing sounded like that of an old, dying man, not that of a child - but he pushed his fear forcefully from his mind. He was a Gryffindor. And besides, the thing clearly needed help - whatever it was. Harry knelt beside the chair, lowering himself to his belly so that he could see underneath, and squinted into the shadows... but that was all that he could see, shadows and leaves, even as he could hear the gasping breaths as though they were panting right beside his ear.

"Hello?" Harry said again, quieter this time. He did his best not to sound afraid or menacing, but gentle, friendly. Hesitating for the briefest of moments, he bit his lip and extended his hand beneath the armchair, groping for the source of the noise...

Hello? It was Potter's voice. Voldemort could just make out the whiteness of the boy's horrible, Muggle plimsolls through the thick carpet of leaves. He curled in on himself, conscious of the noise of his wheezing, laboured breaths. The Dark Lord did not want Potter to see

him like this. None of his enemies could glimpse this weak, pathetic form. But there was no energy left for anger, which had left with the last of his strength, only gruelling, abject shame.

"Hello?"

But now he could *feel* it; his maw gaped with fear, dribbling crimson. There it was. Coming closer. Voldemort's vision was beginning to blur, the leaves merging into a dark, shifting haze as blood pooled around his curled, foetal body. The forest was closing in, its tendrils curling and rustling ever nearer, ready to snatch even this meagre skin from him. Voldemort made a decision, propelled by his terror of returning to that nightmarish, formless suffering: reaching out to the warmth he instinctively knew would keep the grim trees at bay; his tiny palm weighted down by frail, translucent digits far too long for any infant's hand to support. His soft bones in agony, he shuffled the crippled limb towards Potter, casting it like a line through the wet leaves.

Something cold and delicate grazed against his knuckles, something that spasmed and trembled at the brush of his fingertips. Heart in his throat, Harry tried not to jerk away as his fingers travelled over a thin, fragile hand only half the size of his own, a flimsy wrist, clammy skin. The thing was clearly reaching out for him, wriggling along the forest floor; a small, skeletal hand thrust out pitifully from underneath the armchair. Harry had the fleeting, terrifying thought that perhaps this was some kind of Dementor spawn - when else had he ever seen a magical creature with bones for fingers? - but there was nothing dangerous or terrifying about the way that the thing's hand was quivering, as if it took all of its strength to suspend its little hand those scant few inches in the air.

In the end, the rustling trees made his decision for him. Harry couldn't leave this creature here, alone in the forest. It was defenseless; it clearly needed his help. Swallowing, he reached under the chair with both hands, grasped the creature around its middle, and pulled it out as he rose to his knees.

And nearly dropped it in the surge of revulsion that followed. It certainly felt like a child - it was small enough to be a toddler - but its face - oh, its face. Harry stared at it with a mix of horror and fascination, holding the creature at arm's length around its torso - gently, however, for its ribs shone through the skin and were so fragile that Harry feared they might snap with too much pressure. It was at once too old and too young, ancient and ugly and somehow still

underdeveloped. Its skin was chafed and raw beneath sticky wet leaves, its limbs too long and too thin for the bulging ribcage. He could nearly fit both hands around its torso, it was so small.

"You're hurt," said Harry, his heart clenching unexpectedly. He saw the blood trickling from its mouth, smeared across its cheeks when it had been thrashing along the ground. His disgust gave way to pity; this was not something for him to fear. In fact, he had never seen a more pathetic creature in his life.

"What happened to you?" Frowning, he shifted on his knees so that he could pull the emaciated, infantile creature into his arms. It could have only weighed a handful of pounds; his frown deepened as he cradled its head in his elbow, wiping at its mouth with the sleeve of his other hand. "Here, here, we'll get you patched up." His chest tightened painfully at the wheezing, struggling expansion and deflation of the poor thing's lungs. "And we'll have to do something about your breathing as well." Harry was only dimly aware that he was speaking and cooing to the thing as he cleaned the blood from its cheeks, stroking its jaw soothingly with one thumb. After all, whatever it was, it was only a baby - and a baby would not respond.

Despite what many wizards and witches might believe, Lord Voldemort was no stranger to suffering shameful indignities. He had often been caned as a child - trousers round his ankles - for misbehaviours both real and imagined. At Hogwarts he had regularly found himself in the most ludicrous situations with incredibly foolish girls, both from Slytherin and other houses, culminating in one particularly nasty incident with Augusta Longbottom and a bewitched Niffler. He had suffered through the amorous attentions of that old hag, Hepzibah Smith. Out of curiosity, Voldemort had once endured an incredibly embarrassing curse for disturbing a tomb at Giza - two weeks transfigured into a camel, and two more re-schooling himself not to spit at people he did not like. He was fond of experimenting with himself and others and, yes, sometimes experiments went wrong. That was the price of pushing the boundaries of magic. He'd spent years inhabiting the minuscule brains of woodland creatures... and months inside a turban that reeked of garlic. He'd been bottle-fed venom and unicorn blood by Peter Pettigrew, of all wizards!

But this, *this* was a new low. He was being cradled by Harry Potter. The miserable infant he had tried to kill was now cooing at Lord Voldemort as though the Dark Lord were a mindless child. With his lipless mouth open in shock, he must have looked like one. But,

beneath the ghastly, patronising babble, it was... there were no words for such a thing. A tiny, treacherous, relieved part of him desired to stay in the boy's embrace forever - so comforting, so warm, and so different from Wormtail's cringing, disgusted arms.

He wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure what - emotions warring within him. "Potter..." he rasped weakly, blood still bubbling thickly on his tongue, almost choking his narrow throat. With supreme effort, he opened his eyes - which had glued themselves shut with exhaustion, blood, and ichor - livid eyes with slitted pupils, gazing up at Potter with wide, helpless fascination.

The soothing, nonsensical words caught suddenly in Harry's throat, his mouth very dry. This creature, this infant, had spoken Harry's name - and in a hiss that was dreadfully familiar. His fingers tightened unconsciously on the creature's jaw, fear gripping him as the child slowly opened its eyes - red, like the blood smeared across its pale, translucent cheek, so much like the gaze of the man who had been torturing him only a few short hours ago.

"You... you're..." Harry couldn't find the proper words. His cheeks burned with renewed repulsion. Harry had just been - he'd been cooing. The boy's eyes widened, but he could not look away, so caught up was he in that naked, childlike gaze.

But his fear dissipated rapidly as the creature - Voldemort - took another shallow, labored breath. Voldemort was but a tiny, vulnerable creature in this place. He could not hurt Harry here. And he, Harry, found that he did not want to hurt this weak, fragile thing while he had the opportunity. Apparently that was one thing that Harry had not inherited from their unconventional connection: killing infants was certainly not Harry's style.

Harry resumed his dabbing at the creature's mouth, where more blood dribbled from the corner of its thin lips. "Who's to be pitied now, hm?" Harry murmured. "You ought to be thankful I don't have a staircase to toss you down." But the words lacked any venom and a smile quirked his lips as he stroked the child's - Voldemort's - jaw, pretending to rub away nonexistent blood. He decided that he rather preferred Voldemort this way; creepy as the thing in his arms was, it didn't try to kill him, or torture him. *Or kiss you*, added a niggling, unwelcome voice in the back of Harry's head, sending a fresh rush of warmth to his cheeks again.

"I don't suppose you're going to explain why you're stuck like this," Harry said, determined to steer his mind in a different direction. The boy shifted, brought the creature closer to his breast; its skin felt much too cold beneath his fingers.

"Do you not remember...?" It was a lisping, palsied hiss. Parseltongue did not require so much breath. His scarlet eyes were narrowed, but Voldemort did not have the will to move, even if he had been able to. He hardly recalled what Potter meant about the staircase. In nearly seven decades of life, he had never been held like this. Never known such a thing could be desirable. Magic nestled with him against Potter's chest and it was slowly, slowly becoming easier to breathe. He soaked up this sensation - whatever it was - this warm, tingling, extraordinary feeling of perfect closeness - that seemed to seep from Potter's knitted jumper right into his soul. *"You have seen me like..."* - a gasping, laboured inhalation through tiny, flat nostrils - *"this..."*

The cutting slice of ropes against his wrists, a gag nearly choking him, Cedric's eyes empty in the moonlight. The boy nearly shuddered. "I try not to think about it much, actually," Harry said with a weak smile, avoiding Voldemort's gaze, so out of place on this tiny, helpless creature's face. "Not one of my happier memories. Although I did get away from you - I guess that counts for something."

It was clearly very difficult for Voldemort to breathe in this body, fragile and undersized as it was. Harry had never held a baby before - Aunt Petunia had always made sure that Harry was very far away whenever friends with young children came calling - but he supposed that, even if he had held one in the past, the experience would not be very useful to him now. This creature's limbs were spindly and too long for an infant's, but it was so fragile, so lightweight in his arms, that Harry felt like he might snap the thing in two at any moment. And so his touch was both clumsy and gentle, holding Voldemort close to his chest, his palm soft against the cool, clammy cheek that it cupped ever so gently.

"Did Wormtail really take care of you like this?" The bleeding had subsided for the most part, but Harry did not pull his hand away from the child's face, entranced by the way it nuzzled into his shirt, this creature that was somehow Lord Voldemort. "I'm surprised you lasted so long. I reckon he can hardly take care of himself."

A laugh, of all things, found its way unexpectedly up Voldemort's

throat. Cracked and wheezing; a moment of cold, high-pitched amusement ending in a spluttery gurgle of blood. *"Ah, Harry... this rudimentary form allows me the use of my wand. An irreplaceable tool when dealing with blundering fools."*

The realisation was slowly dawning - as Voldemort lay warm against Potter's chest, his too-heavy, lolling head resting comfortably against the boy's hand - that Voldemort did not want to wake up. He liked this easy talk between them, as if Potter really had known him at school, not that any of his schoolfellows would have dared to have spoken to him in such a manner. The idea of Potter not being there, coiled beside him along with dear Nagini, was abhorrent. He wanted to wake up entangled in them both; his treasures, his precious vessels of immortality.

Guilt did not enter his mind. He felt utterly righteous concerning his brutal treatment of the boy - it was thoroughly deserved. Yet it had been a mistake. Voldemort had been approaching this... connection... in entirely the wrong way. He needed to woo Potter. But while his followers still spoke about his legendary charm, the truth was that his charisma had largely evaporated with years of enforced solitude.

Faces, words... all of it had fled before that lonely, agonising, parasitic existence. People had become strange to him in a way they had never been before. *Prey*. Certainly, it had been difficult to mimic the emotions of others before he had learned Legilimency, but now he had no patience for such subtle games; for pretending to be anything other than he was. Voldemort revelled in the scent of terror, in ripping viciously through minds and flesh. He basked in the acrid fear to which even Dumbledore was not immune, sending powerful witches and wizards scurrying, their hearts pumping like mice. *The days are long gone when you could simply trade upon a smile, Lord Voldemort*. The memory of the boy's rebuke echoed within him.

Perhaps it was because of the arms surrounding him, or the liminal nature of dreaming, which allowed hidden truths to blossom into words; punctuated by rasping gulps for air. *"I made a... mistake. I have made many mistakes where you are concerned, Harry. Careless, foolish errors. I am... it is difficult... I am not always..."* Sane, he trailed off, struggling with the word; a secret he tried to hide even from himself, burying it within plans and power. *I'm not mad*. How was it possible to confess such a thing? *"My mind is..."* He could not say it.

He knew his Death Eaters whispered it. How could they understand? They, who had not suffered as Lord Voldemort had suffered. Those

who did not have to fight nearly every moment to keep themselves from icy, eviscerating rage. Those who had not been exiled for long years from all they had ever known: without touch, without scent, and without voice; driven to possess creatures if only to feel scales slide over grass and jaw close around flesh – lingering in their small minds to preserve his sanity as his own thoughts were slowly fused to their relentless *hunger*. The weak body trembled in Potter's embrace.

Harry did not quite know what to do. Lord Voldemort - the great, pompous, flawless Lord Voldemort - was actually admitting to having done something wrong - was barely inches away, in fact, from apologising for it. It was so impossible that Harry was almost frightened; perhaps Voldemort was trying to lure him into a false sense of security, to catch Harry with his guard down?

But then the overgrown, gangling child – all thin, flayed skin stretched tight over brittle bones – began to shake in the circle of Harry's arms, and Harry felt suspicion loosening its grip on his heart. Lord Voldemort intimidated and tortured to get his way; pity was not a weapon in his arsenal. He would never willingly reduce himself to such a pathetic incarnation, and especially in front of an enemy.

And how pathetic he was. It was so difficult to reconcile his image of Lord Voldemort with this trembling, gasping thing in his arms. It looked badly frightened, its flat, ugly face screwed up with anxiety, and Harry was seized with a sudden swell of protectiveness, so fierce that it scared him. And even though Voldemort was probably lying - even though he would never say something like this outside of a dream - Harry was shocked by how badly he wished it were true.

"Don't," Harry said softly, shifting the child - Voldemort - in his arms so that he was holding him tight to his chest, cradling the thing's head to the crook of his neck. "There's no use getting yourself worked up; you don't really mean it. You won't still feel that way in the morning, trust me." His awareness of this fact was almost physically painful to consider.

"I shall..." Voldemort eked out the sibilants, almost burrowing into the boy's jumper, his soft hisses muffled by the wool. *"I shall regret it still... for the worst mistakes are not measured by acts... but by the consequences which follow them..."* It was so easy to see the way forward in this place, encased in such comfort. How much more could he accomplish with ready access to such clarity?

"Consequences," Potter repeated. A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips as his fingers continued to stroke Voldemort's tiny skull. "Aren't the typical laws of cause and effect irrelevant to Dark Lords? I thought that you preferred to Avada Kedavra your way through life."

"Naturally... it is preferable to have... finite solutions. But such simplicity of action is not always possible. And sometimes the ease of it... the pleasurable knowledge that one may crush anyone one chooses... unnecessary though it may be... blinds one to things one chooses not to see... until it is too late." Voldemort tried to lift his hand. With great effort the heavy, translucent claw came to rest beside Potter's neck. *"And Lord Voldemort's temper does not assist him in this."* His bitter smile matched Potter's, the slimy, lipless rictus taut and leering.

It was very easy to see Lord Voldemort in the creature's face at that moment. The boy was very conscious of the bony, spidery hand that had landed on his shoulder, a feebler, miniature version of the fingers that had melted him from the jaw downward yesterday. Harry shivered, but his fingers didn't falter against the Dark Lord's skull, and he was surprised - and somewhat disturbed - to find that his desire to hold and pacify this creature did not abate.

"There's always another way," said Harry softly. "I'll be the first to admit that my temper isn't exactly ... ideal, but I've never wanted to, er, crush anyone. Although I did break a lot of things in Dumbledore's office once." A guilty glance in the other direction. "Hermione's been having me practice counting up to ten before I speak since then. It works some of the time."

"Counting to ten..." Voldemort's little face frowned, the serpentine nostrils twitching, *"what purpose could that serve?"* He looked as though he'd never heard anything more ridiculous, and Harry couldn't help but snigger.

"Well, Hermione says it helps you calm down before you do something you'll regret," he said, squirming slightly beneath the feathery touches of the fingers on his throat. "But that's only if you make it all the way to ten. I don't usually get past five, if I remember to do it at all." He smiled, traced a tiny, stunted ear with one finger. "You ought to try it sometime."

Voldemort hesitated, but then spoke: *"I often feel it... this... this... weight of fury, as though it were a fog I am unable to see through. I know myself to be the most brilliant sorcerer in centuries, yet sometimes it is such an*

effort merely to think through this... miasma... which settles upon my mind."

"I know," said Harry softly. "I can feel it whenever it happens - in my scar." There was a pause, another breeze passing through their leafy clearing, and then Harry smiled. "Maybe I can count to ten for you, the next time I feel it happening? Or - I could always assault you with happy memories, so you'll get angry with me instead."

"I... I... enjoy your happiness. I seldom feel such emotion myself."

Well, that was unexpected. So was the completely outlandish urge to find the Dark Lord in his bed - *the Grangers, Harry! He tortured you, Harry!* - and kiss every inch of his pale, angular face until the harsh expression melted away forever. "Well, perhaps if you weren't so angry all the time," said Harry, smiling and teasing. "Happiness isn't all that hard to come by when you're not busy making everyone else miserable. See?" He gave the tiny face a tender caress with two of his fingers, peering into the red eyes. "I'm happy right now - aren't you as well?"

"Yesss..." the first English word he'd spoken, yet it was barely distinguishable from Parseltongue. "Come, Harry... come and be *mine*..." And suddenly the palms stretched, the fingers gained a lean, sinewy strength; bones lengthened and shot upwards - elongating into a tall frame just as bare and cruelly emaciated. Voldemort gasped, exulted, luxuriating in giddy breaths, relishing his sudden strength; still rubbing his soft, ice white skin against Potter's red jumper, heedless of his nakedness, and in thrall to this new-found freedom whose key was the boy beneath him. The Dark Lord nestled close, splayed across Potter's lap, digging his fingers needfully into the wool of Potter's clothing, pulling him closer than close; red, livid eyes bright and feverish with desire.

Harry gave a startled yelp as the tiny body began to expand rapidly beneath his fingers, limbs flying everywhere - and then Harry was staring into those same red eyes, but they were somehow infinitely more terrifying when set in Lord Voldemort's face. It was one thing to cradle and murmur to Voldemort in that ugly, infantile body; it was another thing entirely to be pinned against a chair by a full-grown, naked Dark Lord not a split second later.

Naked. That was also an important detail. Voldemort was completely starkers, head to toe, and tugging at Harry's jumper in a way that

suggested he would very much like Harry to be as well.

"I - " Harry stammered, eyes wide with shock. His fingers were still spread across the back of Voldemort's head, where they had just been showering a soft, foetal skull with caresses and affection. Flushing, the boy pressed his own head back as far into the armchair as it could go, aware that he was very much trapped. "You - you were just - I was just - *how* -?"

"We are dreaming, Harry..." Voldemort smirked into the boy's shocked green eyes, utterly careless of his nudity. This was a piece of himself beneath him - what need had he of fear or modesty? Voldemort was alone with Potter, for once shorn of even the madness which plagued his waking hours. *Harry, Harry, Harry...* he liked the intimate burr of the twin consonants as he softly whispered the name, as though it were some intricate incantation. The forked tongue lingered over the boy's face, while the spidery talons gently caressed messy, jet-black hair.

Harry let out a shuddery breath as fingers massaged his skull, tangling in his hair. His eyelashes fluttered briefly, still so very conscious of Voldemort's nakedness, refusing to let his eyes leave the Dark Lord's face. "Dreaming," Harry repeated breathlessly, voice catching in his throat when Voldemort shifted in his lap. "Does that mean that -" a devious tongue flicked across his cheekbone, and Harry had to pause to swallow and shut his eyes to compose himself, "that it doesn't matter what happens, then?"

Perhaps he'll kiss you again, suggested that traitorous voice in the back of his mind, and Harry's eyes flew open at the thought, his mouth suddenly very dry. His heart was fluttering irregularly with fear, he told himself, not with anticipation. The thought of kissing Voldemort was appalling, horrible. But the magic of their souls rubbing together, their connection manifested in brilliant, physical sensation - that had been pleasant, hadn't it? Harry recalled the fire that had swept over his body, the head-spinning, breathtaking sense of completion, and his flush darkened. And here Voldemort was, pressed up against him (*naked oh god naked*), forked tongue hovering just above Harry's lips and looking very much like he wanted another kiss. Perhaps ... perhaps it would be alright to give him one, if it were just a dream.

"It means, dear Harry, that we are alone with unlimited possibility..." The flat face hovered inches from the boy's nose, the long fingers

touching and stroking: hair, brows, lips, ears, and neck - everywhere they could find skin to caress. "There are no crook-nosed Headmasters, nor Death Eaters, in this forest. Merely you and I. And what have we to fear from each other, wandless wizards that we are?" The slitted nostrils flared with excitement as Voldemort twined his emaciated limbs around Potter, like a snake tightening its coils.

Harry was coming apart beneath those fingers on his face, soft, gentle touches that left him trembling and useless in their wake. The Dark Lord's skin was a milky blue where the moonlight touched it, the feline eyes glittering, darkened to a livid purple. *Just one kiss*, Harry told himself - just one and he would satisfy this baffling obsession with the impossible, the forbidden. Better to do it here in this strange dreamscape, where Voldemort spoke to him with kindness and had no wand with which to torture him, than in the world of the waking, where one step in the wrong direction could land him trapped in a cellar with a twisted Dark experiment for the rest of his life.

But the illusion of choice was only that - an illusion. Even if he had convinced himself otherwise, Harry could not move away, could not bring himself to push Voldemort off of him. Especially if it meant that he would need to touch Voldemort's skin - cold, naked flesh that sent little shocks of electricity through his trembling heart whenever it brushed against Harry's. It was terrifying, no matter what the Dark Lord whispered, mouth scant inches from Harry's own. Voldemort need only murmur his name - it was just his name, he heard it a thousand times every day - but it only had to fall from those lips to chase shivers across his body; he was shaking, shaking.

The avid, predator's eyes did not leave his face as a thin, anguine tongue slipped out, a tentative question, its two points just touching Harry's bottom lip, and he was lost.

"Ah," said Harry - the last vestiges of any protest left within him - and then his lips parted, opening, inviting Lord Voldemort inside. He touched each tip of the Dark Lord's tongue with his own, gently, tentatively; his entire body was strung tight, breath caught in his lungs, the world narrowed to the shivery hot place where their mouths met in the cool, midnight air.

Voldemort ran his tongue across Potter's with a slow, experimental pleasure. It curled, lingering in the warm crevices of the boy's lips. This lazy, trembling submission captivated the Dark Lord. He wound

them tighter, almost rolling, away from the chair and through the leaves which made way for them, murmuring at their movements.

Parseltongue brushed softly against air and skin. Voldemort lost himself in Potter's scent - sweat, musk, and Hogwarts soap - and lay flush atop him, enjoying this deep intimacy of dreaming souls, teasing with pleasure as he might with pain. A little break, a little pause, then delving once more into lips and teeth, thrilling almost as much in those moments of playful, torturous denial, as he did when he smeared himself possessively across the boy's flesh.

It was worlds apart from the way they had kissed (and Harry was still heavily debating the application of that title) earlier that morning. Voldemort's mouth was not demanding against his own. The forked tongue darted teasingly, fleetingly into Harry's mouth, just long enough to make the boy's insides squirm with butterflies and dizzy anticipation - before he pulled away once again. If Harry felt the scrape of teeth against his mouth at all, it was simply in the form of teasing grazes, startling and full of promises that the Dark Lord then yanked away from him, leaving Harry's mouth cold, the space between their lips buzzing with electricity.

Even when Voldemort lay Harry out on the ground, pinning him to the forest floor with his naked body, his kisses did not grow any more insistent as Harry had expected and half-hoped. A gentle swipe of hot tongue, followed by a nip on his bottom lip, building Harry up and up until he was flushed and wriggling beneath the Dark Lord's body with arousal - simply to pull away, just out of Harry's reach, denying him.

The boy was finding it difficult to breathe at this point, dizzy with desire for - for - for something. For intensity, for pressure, for *more*. He ran his fingers along the back of Voldemort's head, trying to urge him closer, trying to deepen the brief, flighty kisses that were so inadequate for the fire building and burning in his chest. His previous mantra of just one kiss was all but forgotten - but how could he be satisfied? He hadn't even been properly kissed yet!

"You're... doing that on purpose," Harry breathed when Voldemort pulled away for the umpteenth time, looking utterly unaffected and cunning as ever. Harry squirmed, his body rolling against the weight settled atop him. He tried to look accusing, but it was hard to when he felt so dissatisfied and needy, guilt but a tiny presence in the furthest corner of his mind. *Just a dream*, he reminded himself, trying and failing to stay still; *just one kiss*.

The edges of Voldemort's lipless mouth curled wickedly upwards into a mocking smile, while the scarlet gaze widened in a facsimile of innocence. "Indeed?" the high-pitched, eerie syllables were thick with false astonishment as the forked tongue and fingers continued their mercilessly slow assault upon his senses, teasing and tormenting as they trailed across trembling skin.

He pulled up, out of Harry's grasp, resting his bony elbows casually on Harry's heaving chest. The red eyes shone amusement; glittering jewels set in a face which resembled nothing so much as a blank, ivory mask. One long finger brushed a playful, milky nail across the boy's cheek. "What would you have of Lord Voldemort, Harry? Do please enlighten me." The cold sibilants held an almost academic dispassion.

An even darker flush rose to Harry's cheeks as he thought about all the ways he might answer that question. His romantic experience had, up until this point, consisted solely of that horrible, awkward kiss with Cho Chang just before the Christmas holidays. Certainly, he had spent a night or several in the darkness of his four-poster, conjuring up faceless hands and bodies in his mind - hard, guilty touches that expelled the hot ache in his lower abdomen so he could sleep in peace. He had never thought very far past these half-baked, frantic fantasies; but now that Voldemort was lying atop him, naked with fingers full of promise and temptation against his skin, Harry's mind had no short supply of things that he would like Voldemort to do to him at this moment.

"I..." Harry's voice was low and breathless in a way that he had never heard it before. "I want..." The boy's lips parted, but he couldn't make the words come. Humiliation and arousal warred within him, making him squirm with heat, added friction that would drive him mad by the time he woke. "I want you to stop teasing." His eyes squeezed shut as he took a deep breath, humiliation getting the better of him. His voice was trembling with his body, driven to near incoherence by those terrible, addicting touches that unravelled his sanity slowly across the forest floor. He would hate himself when he woke up, he knew, but it was only a dream, it was only one kiss. "I - please - I want all of it, not just these little - these tastes. I want more."

The talons - which had been trailing gently along the his cheek, suddenly sank into the skin and held him still, while the index finger of the other large, spidery hand - beginning at his throat - cut its way through jumper and shirt with all the vicious efficacy of a Slicing Hex. "More, you say?" Voldemort breathed softly across Harry's newly

exposed skin. His words seemed to linger, whispering in the leaves around them. A cruel, obsessive gleam shone in the Dark Lord's eyes. The quiet between their bodies buzzed for a long moment of terrifying promise.

The dark, serpentine tongue swirled, while long, white claws pinned Harry to the ground. Voldemort's skeletal torso swayed with eerie, sinuous grace. The slitted pupils and nostrils were completely dilated. And then he began to move.

It was at once terrifying and exhilarating. Voldemort's movements were inhuman in their fluidity - beyond human. It should have unnerved him; he should have been deeply disturbed, even terrified, of this creature that devoured every inch of his lips and skin in the moonlight.

But some secret corner of Harry's mind stirred at the assault. It was very much like the first time he'd ever spoken Parseltongue, and just as natural: it registered the seamless, serpentine sway of Voldemort's body against his, and it responded.

Fingernails and teeth made livid marks against Harry's skin, white in the moonlight, and the boy let out a series of strangled hisses, the tatters of his shirt flapping at his sides in a stirring breeze. He arched up against the nakedness covering him, burning up against the leaves, his body warm enough to set them aflame. He felt so exposed - chest bare, wrists pinned - but somehow it was not enough. He needed more - more skin, more nakedness - he needed to be consumed – *he needed* –

Blinding white light exploded through the night sky, and Harry's eyes flew open in a hospital bed far away, the Dark Lord's name falling from his lips in broken, frenzied hisses. There was a wand in his face, Madam Pomfrey looking terrified behind the dazzling Lumos it cast. It took several moments for Harry to remember where he was, his heart pounding and his body flushed and sweaty.

Voldemort was nowhere to be seen, and the air above his body had never felt so empty.

Voldemort could taste Potter's desire on the skin scraping flicks of his extended tongue, punctuated by sudden bites into taut muscles to keep the boy in startled, fearful arousal, while the long limbs ensnared and possessed. It was a coiling and uncoiling of wild, otherworldly abandon, accompanied by filthy, demanding hisses as Voldemort submerged himself in feverish sensation.

The pleasure of it gaped and sprawled; a seraphic infection that sizzled beneath Voldemort's translucent flesh and dazzled his senses. No part of that striving, arching skin beneath him could go untouched, unpossessed. There was nothing else - they were one and the same electric pulse beating on and on winding into one painful, ecstatic ouroboros seizing and sucking and worshipping its own raw fleshly tail.

And then it chasmed out of existence as half of the whole fell out of dreaming and everything fractured into cold reflection, as though the leaves themselves were broken shards, turning on Voldemort like a thousand jagged mirrors, scouring the terrifying hole as he fell through into

(want, want, want, want, want)

The quiet breathing of Nagini was ripped apart by gasping, tearing rage and a hollowing, burning ache as cruelly lonely as when Tom Riddle stood in the dining room of the Riddle House, clutching a crying ring and staring down into the dead, glassy gaze of his father.

A cup was forced to his lips, cold liquid down his throat. Madam Pomfrey was taking his temperature, and there were questions flying at him from all sides:

"Is someone hurt?"

"Has there been an attack?"

"Your scar, Mr. Potter - is there pain?"

"No, no - it was - it was only a nightmare, I swear."

If there was anything that could have been more mortifying than waking up in the middle of the hospital wing in such a state - from a wet dream, no less (because *oh god* that's what it was, wasn't it), and with Lord Voldemort, of all people - it would have to have been a chaotic interrogation succeeding the dream in question.

"But really, Mr. Potter, you were thrashing like someone had you under an Unforgivable!" Madam Pomfrey looked extremely flustered. "Professor McGonagall heard you from all the way down the corridor!"

"Indeed," agreed Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with a stare that was two parts concern and three parts suspicion. "That was no

ordinary nightmare."

"It was only a dream," mumbled Harry, his knees pulled up to his chest; the mantra had followed him back into the waking world. He stared fixedly at the sheets, where he was trying to will away the ache between his legs with fierce determination. "It had nothing to do with - with - "

But he couldn't even get out the name. It almost slipped from his lips in a hiss, the way it had only a few moments before, when Voldemort had been - had been - but no; Harry could not even bring himself to say that much, even in the safety of Parseltongue. His humiliation was that absolute.

"The boy is clearly traumatized, Poppy," said Professor Flitwick. "Perhaps we should fetch Albus and -"

"You will do no such thing!" Madam Pomfrey's voice was shrill; both McGonagall and Flitwick shrank back in astonishment, and even Harry flinched in his bed. "Albus was lurking about my infirmary all evening, waiting to have a word with Potter, even though he knows very well that what the boy needs most right now is rest! Now then, Mr. Potter," and she whirled to face Harry, who recoiled to the furthest reaches of his feather pillows, "you say it was just an ordinary dream?"

(Voldemort, mouth and fingers moving so slowly across Harry's trembling flesh)

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey."

"No connection to You-Know-Who whatsoever?"

(Voldemort, fragile and wheezing in his arms – utterly vulnerable)

"No, Madam Pomfrey."

"Very well!" She rounded on the two professors again; Flitwick looked highly affronted, mustache quivering above his lip, while Professor McGonagall's mouth was drawn in a thin line. "Whatever the Headmaster has to say about this can wait until the morning. Back to your rounds, and let me tend to my patients!"

Harry had never been more grateful for Madam Pomfrey's overbearing, maternal tendencies as she ushered the two professors out the door. She forced another potion on him, reapplied some of the

salve on his lips (either oblivious to or politely ignoring the shame coloring his cheeks in the meanwhile), and then extinguished the lanterns by his bedside, leaving him in wonderful, peaceful solitude. He sagged into his pillows with relief when she finally vanished into her office; Harry could not imagine attempting to explain this to Dumbledore if the headmaster had turned up in the hectic moments after Harry's awakening.

What had he been thinking? Harry hid his face in his hands, wincing as his fingers touched sore, healing skin, his flush returning full-force in the safety of the darkness. Only a dream indeed; if the shameful throbbing in his nether regions was anything to go by, Harry's enjoyment of the Dark Lord's physical attentions clearly went far beyond the leafy dreamscape of his subconscious. For Merlin's sake, he had allowed Voldemort to kiss him in real, waking daylight just a few hours earlier! The silence wrapped around him like a blanket, slithering along his body and filled with Voldemort's tender hisses and invitations.

But what Harry hated most - more than his awful behavior, more than even the traitorous way his body had responded - was how cold and alone he felt below the bedclothes, and the burning, treacherous hope that the Dark Lord would still be waiting for him in their forest when Harry returned.

There was much business for Lord Voldemort to attend as the days shortened and the nights grew longer. Many of his forces had still to be marshalled. The Giants, always difficult servants at the best of times, were growing impatient. Such beasts had no concept of strategy and Voldemort was less than impressed with Macnair's ability to restrain them. Unfortunately, due to Dumbledore's efforts last year, it had become necessary to recruit them earlier than he would have wished. Greyback's wolves, likewise, were unreliable allies at best, but at least they vaguely understood the kind of waiting game the Dark Lord was playing.

Waiting for Albus Dumbledore to die.

He had not yet called off the Malfoy boy, amused by the fact that his vaunted task had become suddenly even more irrelevant than before. If Draco Malfoy managed, by some fluke of luck, to kill the Headmaster before the curse took its toll, then well and good, and if he did not, then Voldemort lost nothing and had still succeeded in humbling the Malfoys.

Long, pale fingers reached idly into a pocket and pulled out a humble-looking wand of holly. Its owner had not cared for it very well. Voldemort doubted it had ever seen a polish. It was covered in fingerprints and the varnish was wearing away in some places. Compared to Voldemort's pristine yew wand of many years, Potter's scratched and worn wand looked like the elder of the two. The Dark Lord rolled it slowly between his fingers, feeling much the same disdain and attraction as he did toward its owner. It seemed to hum wistfully beneath his touch, pining for its child. It would be such an easy thing to snap.

Voldemort placed it carefully down atop a pile of spell notes and several drafts of legislation he intended to enact next year once the Ministry had fallen, and summoned to him a pair of badly broken glasses. The blank, livid eyes stared down at them expressionlessly, the mind behind lost in contemplation. The boy was never far from his thoughts, but somehow Voldemort had found the discipline to let him be; to allow Potter time to become once more complacent... or perhaps miss the Dark Lord's presence. Besides, Voldemort had to be careful while the boy remained in the hospital wing under direct observation. A nail stroked along the edge of the wire frame and Lord Voldemort put the spectacles to one side and picked up a quill, gazing thoughtfully out into the snow which swirled in the heavy darkness outside.

The consequences of Harry's impulsive personality had never seemed as dire as they did that next morning. The most glaring complication was that Harry no longer had his glasses or his wand, having lost both to his physical confrontation with Voldemort. Rather begrudgingly, Filch had provided Harry with a wand that he'd confiscated from a student quite some time ago, but Harry had yet to successfully cast a spell with it; whenever he opened his mouth to speak the incantation, the wand would yell something vulgar about its target and then begin to giggle hysterically, never pausing long enough for Harry to say the spell.

Likewise, Snape had given Harry a flask of potion that was not without its own difficulties. It moderately improved his vision, which was otherwise useless without his spectacles, but Snape emphasized that the potion was only designed to sharpen healthy eyesight at great distances, not to cure his father's faulty genetics altogether.

As a result, Harry could see the chalkboard if he sat very still - and this was very important as well, Snape said, although the nasty smirk

curling his lips suggested that this was an addition slipped in especially for Harry - but anything within a few feet of him was still blurry as ever.

And then there was Hermione. Her swollen, red eyes were a near-constant reminder of Voldemort's disturbing amalgamation of her parents. Harry was overwhelmed with guilt whenever he saw her, especially since she seemed to be dwelling on the horrors that Harry must have experienced at Voldemort's hand - horrors that he caught himself playing out in his head with not nearly enough displeasure many times throughout the day. How could he pity Lord Voldemort, killer of mothers and fathers and infants everywhere? Worse, how was it that he could ache for him so? He'd spent the past several nights falling asleep with the secret hope that Voldemort would visit his dreams again – in any incarnation at all – only to find himself lonely and full of self-loathing the next morning. Harry had never felt worse about himself in his life.

And so it was half-blind, wandless, and miserable that Harry found himself at breakfast several days later. Hermione seemed to be doing a lot better today, but Harry was still entrenched in glum silence. Ron, as always, was struggling valiantly to get them to smile.

"You know, that wand isn't half bad, Harry," Ron was saying as he poured himself some orange juice. "You ought to volunteer in Defense today; perhaps it will convince Snape to take a shower."

"Harry will do no such thing," said Hermione, sounding much more like her usual self. "He already lost Gryffindor over sixty points in Snape's class last week, or have you forgotten already?"

Ron frowned. "But Snape can hardly blame him for his wand! When was the last time you reckon he's bathed, anyway? He must realize that it can't be healthy to have that much grease on one person's body."

Harry poked at his uneaten omelette; the familiar bickering was almost a relief, but he couldn't bring himself to join the conversation. He was wondering whether the green blurry bits in his eggs were peppers or parsley, but he did not much feel like walking five feet away from his plate to make the distinction.

He would never find out. There was a loud screech of a barn owl - not an unusual noise at breakfast, so Harry did not look up - and then a small package sent his plate flying, pepper-or-parsley omelette and all.

"Look, the post!" Ron said with forced cheerfulness. Harry peeled a bit of egg off his face. "Were you expecting mail?"

Harry eyed the parcel warily. It was wrapped in silver paper with shiny leaves, a red ribbon tied in a large, ostentatious bow on top. The boy pushed it across the table toward Ron. "Another nutter, no doubt." He grimaced; from the looks of it, it was much more likely to be from one of his plethora of devotees that had emerged from the woodwork after the *Prophet* had finally admitted Voldemort's return. "You can have it, Ron - I'm not interested."

Hermione patted his hand and nodded approvingly. "You ought to just burn it - nothing good comes ever from these anonymous letters."

"Except for all those broomsticks that keep turning up in the post, right?" said Ron, rolling his eyes - or at least Harry thought that he was, considering he couldn't see his face very well - as he tugged at the ribbon. "Look, there's a note, too!"

"Of course there is," Harry mumbled. He wished he still had an omelette to keep poking at, but decided he wasn't very hungry for breakfast anyway. He'd been, in fact, about to leave early when Ron burst very suddenly into peals of laughter, spraying bits of orange juice across the breakfast table. It took several moments for Ron to calm down enough to speak, during which Hermione sniffed disapprovingly and Harry debated whether or not he should take the package back before it started an argument. He had missed their bickering, but not that much.

"Oh - *oh, hell*," Ron said in between guffaws. "Oh, they're off their tree, alright. Harry, you've got to get a load of this."

Harry rested his forehead against the heel of his palm. He had a headache; he supposed that that was another pleasant side effect courtesy of Snape's eyesight potion. Ron stood and cleared his throat dramatically.

"Dear Harry Potter," said Ron in a high, girlish voice; the conversation surrounding them quieted a bit as people nearby turned to listen. "I dream about you near constantly. You are so often in my thoughts some have said that my - er - that my preoccupation with you borders on obsession. Oh, wow, perhaps you should *listen*, then, you old bat!" Ron interjected, and then burst into fits of sniggering again.

Harry, meanwhile, felt much very much like his stomach had dropped straight through the floor. He sat frozen, his blind eyes wide and his

heart pounding furiously, very grateful that Hermione was too busy glaring at Ron to notice how floored Harry was. *It can't be*, he thought wildly, hating himself for the small flame of hope that burned strong in his breast. *He wouldn't*.

"Look, Harry - she says here that you *complete* her," said Ron, grinning foolishly. "Oh, this is *brilliant* – look – she wants you to *penetrate her soul*."

"How do you know it's a woman?" Hermione scoffed, crossing her arms.

"Look at this handwriting!" Ron said, holding the letter out to them. "I don't know a single bloke who can write like this! Look at all the loops - she must be at least a hundred years old. Perverted old fogey." He looked back at the letter and sniggered. "You are *perfection*. Oh yes, those coke-bottle glasses are really all the rage with old, lonely hags these days, Harry!"

Lavender Brown, who had wandered over as soon as Ron had started speaking, laughed a little too loudly at this. Ron looked up and grinned. This seemed to be the last straw for Hermione, however, who was getting so angry that she did not even notice Harry's face turning the color of a ripe tomato. She pushed herself away from the table and rounded on Ron, seething.

"Ron, do you even have *eyes*? He hasn't *got* his glasses anymore!" she said furiously. "How can you be so insensitive?"

"Hermione," Ron said, his face stricken as he looked quickly at Harry to see if he'd truly been offended by the joke. Harry, however, had been too busy going back and forth between trying to evaporate on the spot and fighting a terrible desire to snatch the letter from Ron's fingers and read it a hundred times over, and did not think to offer a word of support. "I didn't - I was only -"

But Hermione had already turned on her heel; she paused only to glare viciously at Lavender, whose laughter cut off as abruptly as it might have from a Silencing spell, before storming out of the hall, Ron close on her heels. There were a few moments of stunned silence, and then the other students gradually fell back into conversation, Harry's package and letter forgotten in light of Hermione's explosive exit.

After all, post for Harry Potter was not all that unusual. Post for Harry Potter from *Lord Voldemort*, however - well, that was a completely different story.

Harry seized the package and letter and walked as quickly as he could up to Gryffindor tower without breaking into a run. He only had half an hour until Transfiguration; he would need to be quick. He traced the wrapping with his fingers as he walked, resisting the urge to tear it open right then and there. It felt so different beneath his fingers now that he knew who had sent it, almost sacred - or dangerous, Harry reminded himself, definitely dangerous.

The door to his dormitory closed safely behind him, Harry nearly sprinted to his four-poster. He sat on the edge of his bed and placed the gift carefully on the pillow, putting aside his burning curiosity so that he could first read the letter in its entirety (and without Ron's commentary, for that matter). His fingers were shaking as they unfolded the letter; there was a blot of orange juice where Ron had snorted.

Dear Harry Potter,

I dream about you near constantly. You are so often in my thoughts some have said that my preoccupation with you borders on obsession. I freely admit that last year, when the Daily Prophet printed all of those disgusting articles about you, I wished to kill you. But the world has turned and I find that I too am relying upon you alone to save me. You are perfection. You complete me. I know we have only truly known each other in my head, but I hope that one day this shall change. It matters not that others think me mad - I know you alone are capable of recognising the truth in what I say.

Haunting my subconscious as you do, I thought I would be so bold as to send you this book of Oneiromantic magic to assist you when penetrating my soul.

Regards,

An Admirer

His fingers traced over the flourish of the signature with a kind of reverence, his lips falling open in astonishment. A funny fluttering feeling rippled in his stomach as his eyes flew over the words one more time (delight and embarrassment and *guilt guilt guilt*). Resisting the urge to read it over again, he pulled the parcel into his lap, silver and red – and of course he would use such ridiculous wrapping, how else would it have gotten past Filch? – to find out what Onei-whatever meant. He tore it open eagerly, held the book at arms' length and sat very still to make out the title. When the words swam into clarity,

however, all he could do was stare.

Dream Warrior read the delicate, golden script on the front. He opened up the cover slowly, carefully, and a strange sort of shiver passed through him when he caught sight of *T. M. Riddle* inscribed in the same flowing handwriting as his letter. Heart racing, Harry turned the next page, just as excited as he'd been the first time he'd opened the Prince's Potions book - and something came tumbling out from inside of it, bouncing across the floor.

"Oh," said Harry, breathless with disbelief. Tentatively, he rose from the bed and picked them up, holding them to the daylight that streamed in through his window. Chest tight with some indefinable emotion, Harry slipped his glasses back onto his nose; they were cleaner than he'd ever seen them and entirely repaired, right down to the very last screw.

Lord Voldemort had always been meticulous. It was this desire for perfection that had assisted him in framing Morfin Gaunt and the fat hag's geriatric elf. And, of course, in convincing Harry Potter to come to the Ministry of Magic scant months ago. Even Severus, whose skills as a Legilimens were considerable, held only the most basic understanding of what such a skill could truly accomplish: he saw only give and take - truth and lies. But then, Severus, for all his exactitude, had very little imagination, and both were required for a powerful sorcerer to truly master the magics of the mind. Used by a truly superior wizard, a pensieve was as versatile as any cauldron.

Having no memories of his own to suit his purpose, Voldemort had acquired a fitting episode from Narcissa Malfoy. The Dark Lord gently dipped the tips of his spidery fingers into the pearlescent smoke of his pensieve, with the air of one gauging its temperature. It was ready. The yew wand tapped the edge of the intricately carved stone basin, before fishing up a gleaming bead from the swirling mist and bringing it to his porcelain temple.

Hairless eyelids fluttered as the memory seeped into Voldemort's consciousness, neither Mrs Malfoy's nor his own, but a seamless amalgamation of remembrance. The crimson eyes shut tight as the Dark Lord's lipless mouth twisted with distaste, and the serpentine nostrils widened with nausea. His temples burned as the warped recollection whirled around him, disgustingly foreign.

Voldemort stumbled and cried out in pain, his stomach heaving with

unfamiliar feelings. A white hand found the edge of the bed. Black silk rustled across the quilt as he crawled up the bed – bruised stars dancing in his vision – and long, skeletal fingers sought the coils of the huge, precious snake sleeping upon the antique bed. "Nagini..." Yellow eyes flickered and she slithered close, tightening around him, comforting her shaking master.

Then Voldemort reached for a dark bottle beside the bed, uncorking it with trembling fingers, and drank deep of the potent Sleeping Draught. "Guard me whilst I dream, dear one..." he managed to eke out the whisper before the mixture overwhelmed him and his senses fell away.

Lord Voldemort stilled, his crimson eyes wide and unseeing, conquering the weak sentiments of Lucius Malfoy's wife as he fused them to a once-handsome man with bleached, half-melted features, bloodshot eyes, and whose lustrous, jet-black hair was just beginning to thin. It required absolute concentration to maintain this illusion as he shed himself, slipping down, down –

(a vertiginous plunge into bottomless slumber that suffocated like the thickening shroud of a Lethifold; the breath of death, terrifying and absolute and no, no, no –)

into a vision of Narcissa's coruscating recollections, her emotions surrounding him, deep and cloying like a wave of sickeningly heavy perfume that stained this melded, dreaming air; the lovesick excitement Lord Voldemort had stolen to use as his own.

Part IV

Classes couldn't pass fast enough for Harry.

He spent much of the morning and afternoon fidgeting in his seat, touching the folded piece of parchment in his pocket when he wasn't paying attention. He did not dare take it out and read it again in front of Ron or Hermione. A mysterious book in the post was only mildly suspicious on its own, but if his friends knew that Harry was carrying around a love letter signed from a member of his supposed septuagenarian fan club, they might begin to ask unwelcome questions about the identity of the sender. And Harry was a poor liar at best when it came to his friends, especially with things that made him uncomfortable; he wasn't sure how long he could keep up the impression that Lord Voldemort was a batty, pining old lady with whom he had no prior connection.

Therefore, he spent the majority of dinner trying to come up with a plausible excuse to get back to his dorm, his letter, and *Dream Warrior*. This was difficult and slightly awkward, since Hermione had refused to speak to Ron since that morning's breakfast, but Harry was able to slip away after Ron began second helpings, pretending that he needed to practice with his new highly dysfunctional wand.

No one was in the dorm this early, but Harry shut the curtains around his bed anyway. After several unsuccessful attempts at Lumos, during which his hair, clothing, scar, and glasses all suffered grave insult, Harry ended up digging out his trusty flashlight from his chest. It had served him well during many stealthy nights at the Dursleys', and he was reminded of Privet Drive now as he pulled the covers up over his head and the book out from underneath his pillow. If it weren't for the occasional giggle from that stupid wand (which was now buried at the bottom of his chest, and still seemed to find itself amused) or the sporadic way the flashlight's colours kept changing to every shade of the rainbow (Muggle batteries did not play nicely with the magic in the castle), it might almost be possible for Harry to believe that he truly was at the Dursleys' again, listening hard for the booming steps that indicated Uncle Vernon was coming to reprimand him for studying such rubbish in the house.

Harry had never been so eager to read in his life. He quickly lost track of time, reading well after all of his dorm-mates had returned and gone to bed, one by one. Hour upon hour of reading, and he was still

going strong, eyes burning a little from concentration but just as giddy as he was when he had first opened the book. Granted, the material itself was interesting: Legilimency, the magic behind dreams themselves, the connection to the dreamer's world and his mind, and, most interesting of all, using dreams to find one's way into the thoughts of another.

But what fascinated Harry the most were the comments scrawled in small, flowing script in the margins. They were not brief and cutting like the Half-Blood Prince's. Tom Riddle had reflected thoughtfully and at length about the material on the edges of each page, sometimes arguing with the author, sometimes expanding on the research that was presented. Harry was entranced; he felt like he was in his second year again, meeting a stranger who somehow felt so familiar to him.

Sometime around two o'clock, the light from his flashlight went all warped, as though it were shining through a cluster of crystals. Harry frowned and shook it hard, but then he was no longer holding a flashlight, and he wasn't looking at his book anymore, either. The boy's mouth dropped open when he looked up and saw that a huge, glittering crystal chandelier had grown straight down through the top of the ceiling above his bed. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head - surely, he must be seeing things - but when he opened them again, he was no longer in his dormitory at all, but standing in the middle of the most beautiful restaurant he had ever seen.

"Mr. Potter," said a voice, and Harry whirled around, wishing that he hadn't banished his new wand, however silly, to the bottom of his chest for the evening. A small voice in the back of his head told him that it wouldn't matter anyway; there was that small ripple, that tiny, foreign undercurrent behind all the images and faces and in the room, that *Dream Warrior* said was the first indication he was no longer in his own mind.

"Er - hello," said Harry, staring up at a waiter dressed all in white.

The man smiled; a dazzling flash of perfect teeth. "We've been expecting you. Right this way, young sir."

Harry followed him reluctantly, heart fluttering with nerves. Music - the sort of music that rich people listened to, a collection of string instruments accompanying a piano - floated on the air, the smell of delicious, classy food along with it. He felt so out of place among these laughing, wealthy adults who sipped at their wines and ate dishes whose names Harry probably could not even pronounce. A

glance down at his clothes made him feel slightly better; at least he was dressed for the occasion in dress robes that reeked of pureblood sophistication, and his hair seemed to have been tamed into submission by some sort of wonderful Harry still found himself on edge. What business did Voldemort have summoning Harry here? And was this even Voldemort's dream? There was something about it - some pure, unadulterated happiness - that seemed so entirely outside of Voldemort's range of emotion that Harry doubted he could possibly be wandering through the Dark Lord's mind.

When Harry failed to spot a hairless, milky head in the sea of dream-customers, he almost believed that he had gotten it wrong, that perhaps it was his own dream after all. He was so busy looking for Lord Voldemort that he did not even realize when the waiter stopped him at a table for two.

"Here you are, sir," said the waiter, and Harry's eyes widened behind his recently-restored spectacles as he took in the other man seated at the table.

It was Tom Riddle, Harry recognized that much - but he looked as Harry had never seen him before. He was, perhaps, in his forties, but he was somehow halfway between the handsome, charming Tom Riddle of Hogwarts and the monster that he would eventually become. He was still a man, but his skin was unhealthily pale. The fine, silky curls that Harry had seen on the boy from the Chamber of Secrets had flattened and withered; they did not shine in the light from the chandelier. But there was something arresting about the sight of him all the same: power and sophistication - Tom Riddle, coming to the apex of his rule over Britain.

Harry realized that the waiter was beginning to look at him strangely, so he seated himself a little clumsily in the high-backed chair. "Thank you for my glasses," Harry said, deciding that *'You look so different!'* was not an appropriate comment to blurt out at the moment. "And for the book. I was up all night reading it." He was very proud that he didn't blush when he remembered how often he had touched Voldemort's letter that day, memorizing the loops in his handwriting like a silly schoolgirl.

"You are welcome, Harry. I am that pleased you received my gift - I understand that all post flying into Hogwarts is thoroughly checked these days." Voldemort smirked, the corners of his thin lips twisting up arrogantly - clearly inviting Harry to share in his amusement. The Dark Lord's voice was not yet the high, unnatural sound that haunted

Harry's thoughts, but a pleasant – if slightly cold – tenor. His eyes, however, held a strange emptiness. Neither silver nor crimson, but a messy collision of the two - sclerae weeping blood - they lacked the beauty of either colour.

Voldemort took a sip of the light wine he'd ordered while waiting for Potter. The Dark Lord did not appreciate that the boy had made him wait in this miasma of Narcissa Malfoy's weakness. But now was not the time to show his impatience, but to smile and smile. "Apparently, the reason the volume has not been reprinted is that some ignorant Ministry official considered it dangerous and thus had it reclassified as a Dark work. I do grow tired of such narrow-mindedness. As if it were not perfectly possible to kill any number of people with a simple Hover Charm."

An elegant hand touched scant lips for a moment, as though apologising for a faux pas. "But I digress, dear Harry. Shall we order?"

The offhand comment made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand up. *Killer*, his mind whispered. It would not do for Harry to forget this, no matter how many beautiful chandeliers that Voldemort dangled over his head. But an even more dangerous part of Harry wondered at the significance of Voldemort's statement. Harry had yet to run into anything in Dream Warrior that could be considered 'Dark.' Certainly, the magic could be manipulated to serve a variety of wicked purposes, but couldn't all magic when placed in capable hands?

Harry looked away, confused. Why was he even thinking about this? It must have been Voldemort's dream, muddling up his thoughts. Voldemort wanted him to order now, anyhow, and he hadn't even the slightest clue about what he was expected to ask for. His questions - why they were even here, for instance - could wait.

The menu was daunting and full of names that didn't mean anything to him. Harry's eyes scoured the beverage list for Butterbeer - for anything that he recognized at all, really - but his hope quickly gave way to mounting panic. No, this was not the Leaky Cauldron. He sincerely wished that he had been given time to prepare for this. Ron might not have known very much about high-class dining, but Hermione's parents seemed pretty well-off; there couldn't be that much of a difference between fancy Muggle food and fancy wizarding food, could there?

"Do you, er, have any recommendations?" Harry tried and failed to

look into Voldemort's expectant gaze as he spoke; it made him even more uncomfortable than usual to look at the Dark Lord in this half-and-half, not quite handsome and not quite monstrous body. "I've never really... this is all so..." Harry stared at the menu, mortified. "My aunt and uncle never really took me anywhere like this," he finally mumbled. He had only been on this bizarre dinner date for about two minutes and he was already embarrassing himself. Perhaps this would be a splendid time to practice waking up.

Without so much as glancing in the waiter's direction, one of Voldemort's long-fingered hands gestured dismissively and the man bowed respectfully and retreated. Something in Voldemort's expression softened as he stared at Harry. "My adolescence was hardly affluent," he confessed quietly. "I did not set foot in such a place as this until I had left Hogwarts. And, even then, Abraxas Malfoy paid for my supper and I was forced to abandon the indecipherably pretentious menu in favour of perusing everyone's minds." Voldemort's strangely human voice was quiet and oddly reassuring. "Besides, this is merely a dream. If you have been reading Dream Warrior as you say, then you should be perfectly capable of lucidly summoning a waiter with your desired repast." The Dark Lord gave another smile, raising a dark eyebrow. "Or... as we are hardly obliged to pay, I could simply order everything?"

The idea of practicing mind-magic in front of Voldemort might have made him panic - Harry was not very good at teaching himself straight out of a book - had he not felt suddenly and vastly more at ease. Tom Riddle had grown up in a Muggle orphanage, had probably encountered many of the same problems that Harry had as a newcomer to the wizarding world. Voldemort understood. It was so easy to forget that, especially when Voldemort sat with his perfectly kempt hair and high-collared robes, saying thing like desired repast and expecting Harry to know what the hell he was talking about.

"Thank you," said Harry softly; he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "That... means a lot. I think I'll give it a shot." He wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing, after all. Taking a deep breath, Harry narrowed his eyes and concentrated on Voldemort's wine glass. A moment of lip-biting and focus later, and a second crystal wine glass had materialized right in front of him, filled with white wine. "Oh," Harry said, positively beaming. It hadn't arrived on a waiter's tray, but that was a detail he could work out later. Grinning, the boy raised the glass to his lips - he had never had wine before - and then promptly struggled not to pull a face as the taste hit his tongue.

His spirits plummeted. Clearly, he hadn't gotten it right after all. Who would enjoy drinking something so bitter?

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly and set the glass back on the table, trying desperately to look like nothing was amiss. His lack of knowledge concerning the 'indecipherably pretentious menu' could surely be excused, but Voldemort clearly expected him to navigate dreamscapes with ease now that he had read *Dream Warrior*. And Harry was unwilling to take a chance with his food after having failed so spectacularly with the wine. "Perhaps I'll just... have whatever you're having?" said Harry, trying for a bright smile, and then added hastily, "As long as it's not sautéed Muggle or something."

Lord Voldemort watched his Horcrux with increasing annoyance. Clearly the boy had not understood what he'd meant at all. Nevertheless, Voldemort was not going to let his plan fail due to Potter's insecurities.

The Dark Lord carefully kept the irritation from his face and cast his mind back to his favourite meal when Potter's age: Yorkshire pudding with real sausages, drowning in gravy. He'd had it sometimes for Sunday dinner at the orphanage before rationing had meant the sausages were replaced by spam. The Hogwarts elves had cooked it occasionally. It made Voldemort feel slightly ill to think of eating such a thing now, but then he was no longer a somewhat malnourished human adolescent with a body determined to reach over six foot.

Feeling decidedly ridiculous, Voldemort visualised the most delicious Toad in the Hole imaginable, accompanied by a honeyed mead cocktail. It was a cause of considerable relief when he thought of the vegetable soup he himself had decided upon. Sautéed Muggle? How disgusting. *Prey should be raw, its blood still hot, it – he blinked – focus.*

Just as the small, warm fingers were about to retreat from the wine goblet Potter had summoned, Voldemort's hand shot forward and trapped them beneath his own. Sticky with nerves or perhaps embarrassment, they trembled at the touch. And *there* it was: the shimmering pleasure of connection. "Harry, you will have to forgive me, it has been many years since I was your age. I forget what it is like to be young - ah!" Voldemort released Potter's hand as a waiter glided over to their table, levitating gleaming silver trays.

The long, human fingers of this foreign body were so different from the cold hands that Harry had come to know so well both in and out

of his dreams. And yet their touch seized him and held fast in the same way that Voldemort did whenever he touched him in any of his other manifestations. It was a reminder that they were bound to each other in ways that paid no heed to shiny dark hair or livid, serpentine eyes. Staring down at where those unfamiliar fingers covered his, like home against the back of his hand, Harry couldn't help but think that it didn't matter whether Voldemort was a baby or a man or a monster: it would always come back to this.

The moment was over just as quickly, but Harry did not have time to mourn the loss of contact; he was too preoccupied gaping at the waiter who had just arrived, and, even more importantly, the food. "*Soupe aux Haricots Verts* for Your Lordship," the waiter announced pompously, setting down their plates, "and tonight's special with our famed mead cocktail for Mr. Potter." Voldemort had ordered him a dish with Yorkshire pudding and mashed potatoes - and another drink to boot. Had Harry failed to conceal his discomfort when sipping at the wine? He might have been embarrassed if he hadn't been so overwhelmed.

"Wow," Harry breathed. He grinned foolishly up at the waiter. "Thank you." The man bowed himself away, and Harry immediately took a sip at the cocktail glass, pleased to find that it was much sweeter than the wine, almost sugary. He turned to his dinner and nearly began digging in - before he noticed the small bowl of soup sitting on its lonesome in front of Voldemort. In fact, his dinner companion did not seem to be very interested in his food at all.

Harry stared for a few seconds, and then slowly put down his fork. "Er, not to be disrespectful," he started, and then winced, because how could he word this in a way that would not be? "This is amazing - all of it - and completely unexpected, but... that's just it. I'm not entirely sure why you're, um, doing this. For me, that is."

The fact that their last encounter had ended with Harry being thrown bleeding down a flight of stone stairs was left unspoken, but how could Harry forget that? He couldn't even explain Voldemort's behaviour away with the drug of their connection - aside from that brief brush of fingers, they had hardly even touched. Not like that last dream, where the allure of skin on skin made it impossible for either of them to do anything but - Harry clamped down on this thought before it could go any further, the faintest shade of pink rising to his cheeks. No, this was no coincidental encounter in a forest; this had been premeditated, and it was confusing Harry more than ever.

The Dark Lord took a small sip of his soup and set down his spoon. "It is merely a pleasant setting for discussion. I sought to invite you here because I am certain you have many questions for Lord Voldemort."

Many questions? Voldemort had now idea. "Well - how do I know that this isn't just a trick?" he blurted out, and then cringed. "I'm sorry, that's - not how I meant it. It's just, it's all very confusing. The dinner, the gifts, the - the kisses," the colour returned to his cheeks full-force, but he ploughed on with admirable determination. "Not that I haven't been enjoying it, but - oh, that isn't what I meant either."

Harry was sure his whole face was on fire now, and he took another sip of the cocktail, looking the other way as he did so, before trying again.

"You've spent my entire life trying to kill me." *Killer*, whispered his mind. *Your parents and Sirius and the Grangers. Killer.* "And the other day... you tortured me. You locked me up with that - that thing. Horcrux or no, you haven't got an obligation to treat me well. And I don't believe you'd be doing any of this if I were still in that cellar right now."

"Yes..." Voldemort whispered, something of the sibilance his voice would one day acquire slipping into the soft sound. "I know. You angered me, Harry, and I lost my temper with you. It was a mistake." Voldemort paused, glancing down at his soup spoon, rotating it between his fingers as Harry had seen him do with his wand. And again Harry caught that heady sense of intense happiness that flickered brightly around his dinner companion, strange and jarring in the pitiless wizard before him. "I have hated you beyond words. I have devoted years to envisaging your demise. And were you anyone else in existence, I would have left you to die in that cellar as punishment for your insolence. But I could not have kept you there for the same reason you are with me tonight. You would have haunted my dreams."

"Then where would you keep me?" said Harry, voice wavering. "What do you want from me? We're supposed to kill each other, not..." *The hot, shivery press of a tongue in his mouth - the undulating weight of Voldemort's body, naked in the moonlight.* "And I'm supposed to stand by and watch as you murder my friends and their families? How can I - how can you expect me to do that? It's all so confusing when I just want... I want..." His voice trailed off, and Harry found he could not look Voldemort in the eye. Anger choked the words in his throat - not with Voldemort, but with himself.

"Yesss..." and it was an entirely different sort of yes; an unrefined breath of possession that made the dreamscape ripple and shift in the wake of such desire. *There* was his precious piece of soul gazing needfully at him through the green, green stare. For a moment the bloodshot eyes burned pure crimson, but then the thin lips grimaced and it was over. Voldemort grit his teeth and lifted a hand to his cheekbones, letting them rest against his fingers. The Dark Lord closed his eyes. It was so difficult not to be provoked by Potter's emotion; his painful, exquisitely obvious desire.

His voice was hoarse and very human. He did not look at Potter. The emotion in his words was only half a lie. "You ask me this as though I do not know that you are my enemy... as if I knew anything at this moment but the fact that *you are mine*... all these long nights I have lain awake thinking only of... as though Lord Voldemort were not rendered as... *vulnerable* to this madness as-"

We're supposed to kill each other. Potter's speech triggered something in Voldemort's mind and all other thought came to an abrupt stop. His eyes narrowed and he leaned slowly forward in his chair, pushing the soup aside, his pale, waxen features suddenly composed and utterly intent. "Harry... tell me the prophecy."

"I knew it," Harry said, his voice full of bitter triumph. "I knew you wanted something."

He remembered the dreams that Voldemort had sent him, just last year, and it was like a slap in the face. It was all about the prophecy; it had always been about the prophecy. The pathetic, crying creature in his arms, the sea serpents, the kisses - even this fancy restaurant with Voldemort dressed in a human body, feigning distress over the circumstances - it was all for information. It had gotten Sirius killed last time, and now it would kill Harry. Voldemort would go back to hunting Harry's blood as soon as he had what he wanted, this prophecy predicting their demise.

And Harry had been such a fool. He had fallen for it once again. He had clung to that stupid letter all day long; he had melted beneath those fingers and eyes; he had played the silly, malleable little boy and now Mr. Granger was dead and he was trapped, and Voldemort would learn what Dumbledore had fought so hard to keep from him.

"You're the only reason that it even came true," said Harry furiously, anger rising in his throat. His fingers fisted the dress robes in his lap

to stop the trembling in his fingers. "Isn't that funny? Dumbledore said that if you hadn't come for me, it would have never even been fulfilled. You marked me as your equal by attacking me - but your - your *servant* didn't hear that part, did he? I was just a baby - I was just Harry - and now you've fashioned me into some kind of saviour. You've made me your enemy! The prophecy says I'm supposed to kill you now, and I'll - I'll have to die as well. If you hadn't listened, if you hadn't done anything, none of this would have ever happened. But now," his voice caught in his throat, "now I've got to die either way, and it's all your fault."

The high-backed chair scraped backwards against the marble restaurant floor. Voldemort stood, glaring down at Harry, eyes blazing, the air around him choked with violent magic. "Neither of us is going to die, my precious *Horcrux*." The Dark Lord began to pace around the table, waiters and nearby tables simply melting away, allowing him room.

Voldemort stopped behind Potter's chair, placing his hands on the boy's shoulders, pressing him into his seat. "You imagine this to be a trick of Lord Voldemort's devising?" he hissed coldly. "We have passed the time for games, Harry. Shall I tell you who is going to die? Your beloved Headmaster... and within the next year, I suspect. He did not want to tell you about his hand, did he? No...? Well, there will come a time - very soon - when Dumbledore will not be able to protect you from me. I have tried to be kind, dear one, to let you see that eternity with me will not be the horror you imagine. I asked about the prophecy precisely because I have no intention of letting any part of myself die."

The nails dug into Potter's dress robes as Voldemort leaned down to whisper softly, triumphantly, in the boy's ear, "I know your weakness, Harry. You cannot stand to watch the suffering of others, knowing it is for you that they die. And if you *ever* attempt to end your own life, then your young friends will discover just what it is to face the wrath of Lord Voldemort."

"No," Potter breathed, but it did not matter how hard the boy clenched his robes, his fingers were trembling uncontrollably. As they should. "No, you're lying -!"

He wrenched violently away from Voldemort's fingers, flying to his feet and sending the chair clattering to the floor between them. The music had vanished, along with the waiters and other diners; they

were very much alone. "*Don't touch me!*" Potter yelled, whirling around to face the Voldemort, who glared murderously at the boy. "You don't get to say these things and touch me. You don't get to dangle my friends over my head like some - some kind of damn ultimatum when you're going to kill them anyway! And don't you dare claim that you've been *kind*."

Potter's hands flew forward, grasping the Dark Lord by the front of his robes. The boy was still shaking, shaking with rage, and he clung pathetically to Voldemort merely to remain standing.

"I was kind to you," the boy hissed; young face screwed up with anger. "I was trying so hard and you called it insolence! You nearly killed me! You don't give a damn about me - just the part that's somehow wedged itself inside my soul." He drew himself up, inches from Voldemort's eyes. "But it doesn't matter. I will *never* be yours!"

Voldemort's large, pale hand slapped Potter across the face and he grappled the boy's flesh, denying the screams. He fixed his mind around Potter's errant consciousness; his arms wrapped firmly around the shaking, furious child, and denied him voice, fury, thought – binding Potter to his own skin.

For Voldemort their battle had become purely metaphysical, their minds wrestling for control of the dreamscape. It was a ruthless claiming of mind and soul and Voldemort held it with the tenacity of one who has spent years clinging to the minds of others. *You are mine*. He seized their connection –

(shivering perfection both utterly remote and all encompassing)

And refused to let go until Potter admitted defeat.

He was trapped. Voldemort's body encompassed him, holding him fast with an iron grip. Harry thrashed violently, swinging his arms, kicking his legs, but there was nothing he could do to break the hold that the Dark Lord had on his struggling body. He cried out in anguish as Voldemort's *mind* clamped down on him, too, invading him from the inside-out until he forgot that he was physically trapped in his efforts to eject the foreign, familiar force from his thoughts.

You are mine, mine, mine - a painful, pounding mantra in his skull. With every pump of his heart, *mine*, the word was stamped into his blood, *mine*, released into his veins. Voldemort consumed him - Voldemort owned him - and Harry, thrashing, screaming, *mine*, held

tight against Voldemort's body, could no longer tell where the Dark Lord ended and Harry began.

But it wasn't foreign, and it wasn't painful. Even through Harry's all-consuming rage, the beauty of their connection shone blindingly bright, drawing the fight from his body in one shuddering breath. It mixed and pulsed with his blood, mine, but it wasn't a condemnation - it was perfection, it was peace, it was everything that was right with the world and wrong with Lord Voldemort. The boy resisted its call for a few, impossible moments, flailing weakly against the Dark Lord's chest, before sagging against him, gasping and shaking. Voldemort's arms were still wrapped tightly around him, the only thing keeping him standing; his cheeks were wet, and it was very hard to breathe.

I hate you, he thought fiercely, but the words refused to fall from his trembling lips. He could feel Voldemort's breath against his hair, a long-fingered hand slowly brushing through Harry's sweat-spiked hair, stroking him possessively, one arm still firmly wrapped around Harry shoulders. "I have seen your dreams, Harry," the implacable voice murmured, "and I have seen your fears. Always, my precious one... *always...*" The same soul sang between them as the restaurant fell away, along with its strange mist of excitement, and the air became something cold and eternal. "Fate has given you to Lord Voldemort, Harry... and he shall never allow you to come to harm..."

It was a long time before Harry emerged from the crook of Voldemort's shoulder. He was tired, the kind that ached in his bones, but at last he lifted his head, blinking red-rimmed eyes. They were standing in a snowy hallway now, the night sky twinkling with stars. Harry somehow knew that this place was very far away from the dazzling tables with their sparkling wine glasses, served by waiters all in white.

"Where are we?" His voice was hoarse from his shouting. He disentangled himself from Voldemort's arms, taking in their surroundings with a tight throat. There were pieces missing from the wall and a gaping hole in the floor where it had clearly taken a bad explosive curse. But amidst the snow that had gathered on the once-carpeted floor, Harry could see the lines of a fallen picture frame poking through, faces too familiar even through the light dusting of snowflakes.

And there - the sound of a baby bawling, just down the hall. It was not the cry of a child who was hurt or hungry, but one that was badly frightened. The same instinct that had seized him in the forest took

over now, and Harry tore himself from Voldemort, forgetting about the picture, forgetting his anger. The sound struck something in him, something deep and raw; a feeling of dread rose in his chest as he approached the door at the end of the corridor.

But it was numbness that greeted him when he saw her on the ground. She looked like an angel, this woman who would have been his mother. Her hair was almost purple in the moonlight, her skin as white as the snow swirling around her. And there - standing in his crib, hardly a year old - there, that must have been... *him*. That must have been Harry.

Harry approached the child with wonder in his eyes. This baby that was him but not him stared back, eyes as green as the woman's on the ground. For the first time, Harry vaguely understood the urge that Voldemort must have felt whenever he saw his Horcruxes. Harry wanted to scoop the child up, to shower him with kisses and love, to never let him see the neglectful hands of his aunt and uncle. "I was so young," he whispered, walking to the crib, stepping over his mother. "Look, I didn't even have - this was before you gave me -" Harry's fingers brushed over the toddler's forehead, so smooth and naked. Unexpected emotion swelled inside of him, and Harry turned away jerkily; it was suddenly painful to look at the crib, knowing that there was nothing he could do, that this child's fate was sealed in darkness forever.

"Why did you bring me here?" Harry asked, his voice choked. He could not look at the child, nor at Voldemort, nor the woman on the ground. He settled for his fingers, which were clenching against the palms of his hands, so dangerously near to trembling again.

"Harry, we are not in my mind any longer - *you* brought us here." Voldemort stood in the doorway, clearly unwilling to cross the threshold. He wore another face here: older and more warped, with wings of grey streaking what little remained of his dark hair. Stark black, grey, and white against the snow, Voldemort seemed almost like a reluctant ghost. "It was autumn, not winter... and I... I hardly remember what happened after I cast the curse. But you... you would have been left alone in the wreckage. You recall things I do not." Pale fingers gestured at the ruined ceiling resentfully.

Harry's surprise was dull and fleeting, if only because it made sense. "I dream about it sometimes," he admitted softly. His eyes wandered without his permission to his mother; he felt the first, cruel sting of grief for her death in his heart. "I hear her screaming. And then she

goes quiet, and I see - I see -"

He raised his gaze to the man in the doorway, a dark silhouette with the glowing red eyes that had haunted his nightmares for fifteen years.

"I will never forgive you," Harry said, voice shaking. "How can anything make me forget all of this? Don't you see?" *I hate you*, he thought again, but the venom had drained from the words; they felt hollow, even inside his mind.

"And I cannot forget thirteen years of exile, you impertinent – " But something made Voldemort's livid eyes widen and he shuddered and drew back into the hallway as he caught sight of a smoky shiver on the night air, desperate in its suffering - a sliver of Voldemort's own magic brushing against him, less than the meanest ghost. Harry saw a wand clatter to the floor, seemingly out of nowhere, rolling away from Lily Potter's body to rest under the baby's crib. "*No...*" The Dark Lord hissed weakly, turning from the invisible weight of his own tormented, fearful shadow.

Harry's feet took him across the room without his asking them to. He passed straight through the ghost of the Dark Lord's spirit, hardly shivering as he did so - for it wasn't real, not truly. None of this was. But the pain on Voldemort's face was real, and that was enough to carry Harry to his side in an instant. Harry's skin was still warm from being wrapped in the folds of Lord Voldemort's arms; and this is why he needed to soothe him, Harry told himself, not because he cared, not because he pitied.

His hand reached out and brushed against a pale, gaunt cheek. "Then we don't forget." His breath misted on the cool night air as he gently turned Voldemort's head to look him in the eye. "We learn and we move forward. And we don't kill children anymore," he added with a small, slightly hysterical smile.

Warmth - alive and welcoming – unexpectedly caressed Voldemort's face and this time it was the Dark Lord who surrendered himself to the boy. In that touch was proof that he was still corporeal, proof he had conquered death and the insanity of such a terrifyingly slight existence. *Few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable.* He leaned down, resting his cheek against Potter's shoulder.

It did not occur Voldemort that Potter's words were rhetorical. He would gladly trade any amount of children for this comfort. It was not

as if he could not kill them once they were older. "The werewolves will complain," he said softly, letting the reassuring pulse of their connection seep into him, "but I can bring Greyback and his cubs to heel. Very well. You have Lord Voldemort's word. What sort of ages are we discussing?" He kept his eyes closed - still haunted by lingering, evanid memories.

At first, Harry nearly laughed, his hysteria bubbling up inside of him. Harry had been teasing, and now Voldemort was talking about werewolves and age limits? Surely, he must be joking. But the laughter caught in Harry's throat, never finding voice, when he realized that there was no humour in the Dark Lord's words.

Lord Voldemort would stop killing children? Harry's eyes widened and he was very glad that Voldemort's face was hidden in his shoulder; the shock in Harry's expression surely would have ruined everything.

"Until they're of age," he answered automatically, his pulse racing. His fingers travelled to the back of Voldemort's head, touching his ears and throat; a resurgence of warmth and hope through his fingertips. "So they'll be able to defend themselves, should they need to fight for their lives."

Voldemort almost laughed as he brushed his own fingers up the boy's spine, letting their minds sink away from the bleak cottage - *safe, safe and warm* - his own rooms at Malfoy Manor; a fire crackling in the grate and Nagini a dark spool of sleeping scales on the hearth rug. And Potter still holding him, surrounding him with the wondrous, blissful heat.

As if they would be able to defend themselves against the greatest sorcerer in centuries. As if Potter's bargain would save such young fools from the slaughter, should they be foolish enough to fight. "Seventeen. And, in return, you will continue to..." The hissed whisper elapsed in a sigh of pleasure. *You will continue to do this...*

Seventeen. Harry could hardly believe his ears. Every child, safe and sound until the age of seventeen! He was exulting - Dumbledore had said that Harry couldn't help the Order, that he needed to block Voldemort from his thoughts, when all this time he simply had needed to let him in. Seventeen. How many hundreds, thousands of lives had he just saved? Harry no longer felt helpless. He felt powerful and strong, he felt full of hope and –

- very, very warm. Harry blinked, and realized with a jolt that they were no longer in the ruins of Godric's Hollow, but in a warm, comfortable room with a fire. There was no more midnight winter breeze, but he shivered all the same at the long, lazy tour that Voldemort's fingers made up his back. *And in return...* Harry was very proud that the only outward indication of his understanding of this statement was the way his breath shuddered on the next exhale. Was that even what he was asking? Perhaps he only wanted Harry to continue holding him - which would *not* be a disappointment, Harry told himself firmly, no sir. But he still felt his cheeks growing warm as he took in the fireplace, the snake, the bed.

Harry knew then that his resistance was useless. He would do anything. If he were fated to spend an eternity with Lord Voldemort, he would make damn sure that it was on his own terms.

It was as though a physical weight had lifted off his chest; the absence of his guilt was that tangible. "Yes." Shame was the farthest thing from Harry's mind as he moved his mouth to Voldemort's ear, fingers still tracing the other. There was bare, smooth skin behind it now - Voldemort had shed his human skin and returned to his serpentine body. The boy took a shaky breath and half-whispered in their shared, secret tongue, lips brushing against the cool lobe of the Dark Lord's ear, "*Yes, I will.*"

Voldemort's breathing stuttered out of tiny, anguine nostrils as Potter's fingers splayed across his skin. He was caught in the hot breath that hissed such divine promise into his ear. It mattered not that the werewolves would likely defect, he hardly cared. This war would be won by control of the Ministry... not by a pack of savages. But then Potter pressed closer against him and all thought of Wizarding Britain vanished from his mind.

And Voldemort, who had never once allowed another being to have power over him, and who shrank from all connection to any other soul but his own, found himself utterly helpless in Potter's embrace. Hands and lips pressed into his pale, skeletal body and he did nothing but tremble and hiss small gasps of pleasure - enthralled - tongue flicking lazily, his livid, crimson eyes wide and eerily becalmed; a wild, deadly creature tamed by a hypnotist.

Harry watched, captivated, as Lord Voldemort transformed for the fourth time that night. He melted beneath Harry's gentle touches, so

unlike the possessive creature that Harry had come to expect during these sorts of encounters. It made him feel wildly powerful. Harry dragged his open mouth up the line of Voldemort's throat simply to feel the way the pulse quickened beneath his lips; he traced his blunt fingernails along the slender jaw just to feel it tremble. And he stared, green eyes wide and hungry, at the naked, raw pleasure in Voldemort's crimson gaze.

Harry had never done anything like this before, but some blessed instinct brought him to the bed, pushing Voldemort gently back against it. Their knees brushed together; his fingers never left the Dark Lord's face, touching his jaw, his throat, drinking in his skin. But Voldemort's small, trembling responses were all the encouragement Harry needed. He was high off the knowledge that this was *all for him*, that he, Harry, was doing this to the greatest wizard of their time.

Harry was so caught up that he hardly realized how badly his own body was shaking. Unwilling to let his legs buckle, Harry climbed carefully into Voldemort's lap, knees bracketing the Dark Lord's thighs, a new sort of contact. He was ecstatic and uncertain all at once; how much could he do? How far could he go? He tentatively ran his fingers down the Dark Lord's cheek, leaning in closer. It was suddenly twice as difficult for him to breathe.

"Can I kiss you?" It was only half of a whisper, and his voice came out too husky; the words ghosted across Voldemort's mouth, and Harry's lips felt very dry, because they were only an inch from touching.

Scarlet eyes blinked up at the uncertain, verdant gaze above; the boy's weight resting atop him with his cheeks flushed and his chest bellling with emotion. Lips which no pain or madness could touch, just scant fingertips from Voldemort's own. Potter's question almost seemed as though it were in a foreign language, or asked underwater. It was a long while before Voldemort even registered that heat had stilled at this inexplicable moment, trembling on the brink of delirium

Oh, Harry... be not afraid. Yet Voldemort's assent, when it came - after a long moment of wondering, incipient breath - was oddly grave. It was the testimony of a lord: imperious and formal. A voice, a wizard out of context. As if Voldemort were not lost beneath Potter, dizzy in skin buzzing and begging for the boy's touch, but giving a servant permission to fulfil some great task. *What vocabulary could truly satisfy the significance of such allowance?*

A pale spider of a hand caught the boy's chin, the claws gently guiding Potter closer as Voldemort slowly opened his lipless mouth and his serpent's tongue slipped out to brush seductively against Potter's own.

"You may."

It was this gentle submission, hidden beneath the domineering tones of Lord Voldemort, that thrilled Harry most of all. His heart was racing wildly as he let himself be led forward, every cell in his body concentrated on where Voldemort's tongue touched first Harry's lips, and then his tongue. He couldn't help but wonder how this would feel outside their dreaming minds - if it would be just as sweet or simply more intense. And then his tongue was allowed entrance into Voldemort's mouth, and Harry stopped thinking.

The boy slowly curled himself into the Dark Lord's body, giving him a long, slow kiss, and then another. Voldemort was letting Harry take charge, but despite Harry's inexperience, he felt emboldened by the generous reactions beneath him: a shudder when Harry touched his tongue against Voldemort's, the rapid dilation of opific nostrils when Harry's hands smoothed up and down his sides. It was exhilarating. This wizard could kill him with the merest flick of his wand, and yet here he was, powerless beneath Harry's mouth and hesitant explorations.

Their agreement was all but forgotten in the back of Harry's mind; he was focused entirely on learning this creature beneath him, a fission of triumph and something else shivering across his nervous system whenever he managed to find a new place in Voldemort's mouth, on his neck, behind his ear, that elicited any sort of response, however small. He simply could not stop *touching*. His fingers were restless and needy, betraying the slow, hot tangle of their mouths.

But it was all a bit too much for him. Harry realized with a wave of fresh mortification that, somewhere during the proceedings, he had moulded his body completely against Voldemort's and that his arousal must be horrifyingly obvious. Breathing very heavily, Harry forced himself to pull away, resting his forehead on Voldemort's shoulder and trying fruitlessly to calm his pulse. "I'm sorry," he finally breathed against the pale column of a throat. "I've... never exactly done anything like this before." A shameful admission for any boy his age, and Harry felt his warm cheeks flush even deeper. "I'm sorry if I'm being... inappropriate."

"No," Voldemort whispered into the black hair soft against his gaunt cheek. "Quite the opposite." He shifted onto his side, drawing Harry with him up the bed, further entangling them. "Besides which, I have never allowed anyone such intimacies with my person either."

Harry blinked with disbelief. "Really?" It didn't seem possible. Voldemort moved with unrivalled grace; his fingers knew exactly where to touch to keep Harry strung tight as a bow.

But perhaps that was because they were, in many ways, reflections of each other; perhaps it was the same sort of knowledge that guided Harry's fingers and lips across the Dark Lord's skin that rendered Harry just as helpless beneath Lord Voldemort's touch.

"Thank you," he said, not just a little breathlessly. Everything seemed to change with this admission. Harry remembered the gasping baby in the forest, the way that Voldemort had shrunk from his touch in Malfoy Manor, and it all suddenly made sense to him. Voldemort, who had never known love, who had never had any friends, would never have possibly let anyone this close to him. This no longer seemed like a bargain - it was a gift.

Harry took hold of Voldemort's hand and brought it slowly up to his face. The fingers were so long and elegant, the pale, spidery digits understating the strength beneath the skin; they fascinated Harry as much as they terrified him. Heartbeat picking up again, he massaged the palm with his thumbs, circular, firm motions. Harry had seen Hermione touching Ron's hands like this by the fire after a particularly rough Quidditch practice, and Harry focused all of his attention in this way now, rubbing from wrist to palm to the base of each finger. His eyelashes fluttered involuntarily as he lifted an index finger to his lips, running his mouth from the long, grotesque nail, down to the soft, ticklish skin that separated it from his thumb. He placed an open-mouthed kiss in the centre of the palm; he felt very warm all over. "Thank you," Harry said once again, this time to the smooth wrinkle of Voldemort's heart line. His voice was very low. "Is this all right, then? Perhaps you can just tell me what feels good. Whatever you want."

Voldemort said nothing, swaying slightly as his wand-hand was tenderly osculated by the boy's lips. The conduit for his power, his fingers seemed to almost bleed magic like a sparking wand under Potter's touch. It was strange and wonderful to see that pink, excited face against Voldemort's marmoreal, over-large hand. Yet it looked so dead against Potter's fine, youthful skin. Colourless flesh barely

covering the bones beneath. It made Voldemort swallow, but he did not glance away, losing the thought to Potter's caress. He had moved beyond death and that came with a cost he was proud to wear on his skin so that those who saw Lord Voldemort knew it too. *Yes.*

And how astonishing it was to have a body at all; to be able to see, smell, touch... after so long crouching in the minds of lesser creatures, ripping into their thoughts just to feel the friction of his - *their* - scales against the grass... or his - *their* - fangs sinking into warm rodents, or their coils entwining and... *and...* to be able to trick his mind even for a second into believing it was not trapped in an endless abyss of pain without true sensation... "*Yesss...*" he hissed slowly, and something of the raw desperation of that time came into his voice.

Voldemort had never looked more like a serpent than he did at that moment. It stirred something feral inside of Harry, and he found that his mouth had suddenly gone dry, Parseltongue whispering through his thoughts. Was this how it normally felt, he wondered, when other people were together in this way? Was there some wild place in everyone's mind that came alive with the rush of arousal through the veins?

Or perhaps this was, like so many other things in this increasingly bizarre relationship, unique to them.

Harry slid his fingers in the spaces between Voldemort's own and crawled on top of him, against him, fitting their bodies together. He remembered the way that Voldemort had moved against him in the forest, naked limbs against Harry's bare chest, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Parseltongue," he whispered; the language was somehow infinitely more sensual when hissed in the buzzing space between their mouths. "It's because of you, isn't it? Because I'm -" yours, he had almost said, and caught himself just in time. "Because you're inside of me." He took a shuddering breath. "Is that what this is, too?" He let his lips brush the skin around Voldemort's mouth, the jolt of thrilling energy that tore through them a punctuation mark for the statement. "Is that why... ?"

Is that why-?

And the ecstatic warmth blinked out.

It was dawn. A peacock screeched. Voldemort's trembling fingers found Nagini, but her blood was as cold as his own. The Dark Lord did not rage, or tear at the sheets. He lay, shocked at Potter's absence, just keeping from feeling for the boy's warmth beside him. Then he curled into himself for a long time, eyes tight shut, imagining he was still being touched as he had been in the dream, making himself vulnerable to imagined caresses. He did not answer Nagini's questions; he tried not to think of anything but the ghost of the boy's body, still entwined, still... *still...*

Eventually, Voldemort climbed out of bed – restless with need – and glided silently into his study.

Potter's wand still sat on his desk where he had left it. An ill-kept twig of a weapon. He drew it close, stroking the finger-marks left in the varnish. The Dark Lord settled himself beside the fire, Nagini coming to curl obediently at his feet. How real it had been. How like this very chamber. The ghost of the boy filled his senses, haunting the room with his unfinished words. The sharp nail of Voldemort's index finger came away from his temple with Narcissa's silvery gleam of memory, which sparked and hissed like an angry snake, as the Dark Lord flicked it bitterly into the flames.

Curled up in his armchair, with the sun just beginning to slip between the gaps in the heavy curtains, he reached disconsolately for Potter's thoughts.

The world gave a horrible, jerking shudder. Harry's eyes flew open - even though they were *already* open, even though they had just been gazing straight into Voldemort's for the better part of thirty minutes. But now the burning crimson eyes were nowhere in sight. There was only the darkness of the Gryffindor dormitory, lonely and unending, save for the sputtering flashlight that had wedged its way underneath his pillow. *Just a dream.*

Harry's heart wrenched painfully inside his chest. For the first time, he was truly upset that they had been torn from each other's minds in the night, because, dammit, they had finally been *getting* somewhere. Harry suspected that Lord Voldemort had never felt so human. And it was Voldemort's connection with his humanity, with Harry, that had made every underage child safe from Voldemort tonight. Perhaps - perhaps if Harry could continue to make him see and feel as a human did, perhaps the rest of the wizarding world might be saved as well.

Harry lifted his head slowly. He found that it had not been resting against his pillow, but the book. *Dream Warrior*. His throat tightened as he saw the beautiful, careful handwriting of the wizard that had just been shivering beneath his fingertips. He closed it with a loud snap, but his churning emotions did not vanish with the now-familiar scrawl.

Perhaps he could return to bed? It was true that he had gotten very little sleep, but Harry found that he was no longer tired. And he had fulfilled his end of the bargain; Voldemort was the one that had pulled out of their dreamscape, not Harry. So then why did he feel so empty?

He sat up, burying his face in his hands. He forced himself to stay this way for many minutes, trying to clear his thoughts, trying to keep from obsessively pouring over every fine detail of the past few hours. It was not before long that he caved, his traitorous fingers pulling out the folded sheet of parchment from where he had tucked it inside the book. He tried to read it in its entirety, but his eyes kept getting stuck at one line in particular: *I know we have only truly known each other in my head, but I hope that one day this shall change.*

The boy gave a weary sigh and closed his eyes.

Harry!

Harry nearly leapt out of the bed. He looked about wildly, expecting to see a pair of blood-red eyes staring at him from the folds of his bed-curtains. But he was just as alone as he had been upon waking - just as alone as he had been all night, he reminded himself. Perhaps he had fallen back asleep? That was the only explanation for -

Harry...!

He shook his head, rubbing at his scar subconsciously with the heel of one hand. He had definitely heard it this time - but it came neither from his curtains nor his bed, but from inside of him. How was that possible? "Voldemort?" he whispered as loudly as he dared. The hope he would not admit to burned brightly, treacherously inside of him.

Voldemort closed his eyes, oblivious as Nagini slid into his lap, all of his concentration focused on letting words slide through his own soul and slip into Potter's: *"Yes, yes, Harry I... I did not wish to awaken..."* Voldemort's half-closed eyes glittered as he rubbed the nape of his neck against the darkly embroidered upholstery of the chair. His fingers pressed against the soft armrest, clawing into the velvet.

Voldemort thrilled to hear his name on those lips, murmured within him.

It was like learning that he had grown an extra limb overnight. He wondered at this new place inside of himself where Voldemort could whisper to him. The Dark Lord's pleasure shivered through him when he prodded at this space inside his soul, and he bit his lip, hope, hope.

"Me neither," he hissed softly in the darkness, unsure of how to respond in turn through the use of simple thought. It was easier to slip into Parseltongue, imagining Voldemort's face in his mind's eye. Without a wand to cast a Silencing charm, it was the safest way to speak aloud right now in a room full of sleeping boys. *"I couldn't fall back asleep. I wanted to, though,"* he felt it was important to add. He leaned back, trying to calm himself; he was sure that his pounding heart was loud enough to wake his dorm-mates on its own, never mind the hissing. *"It was... a very nice dream. I never got to thank you for dinner."*

You are jesting with me, Harry, you hated the dinner. Voldemort's mood darkened as he recalled the boy's flash of temper and misplaced suspicions. He doubted if Potter had understood a word of what he had been trying to communicate.

Frustration burned into the link as Voldemort stood, lifting Nagini from his chair and gripping the mantelpiece, glaring daggers into the fire. Anger flared within him. It opened its red jaws and shrieked at Potter's absence; Voldemort fought to think as it howled in his broken mind.

Narcissa slept on the same floor: Lucius' beautiful, pureblood wife, whose lovesick feelings had so disgusted him. It had not been enough: Malfoy's punishment for losing Lord Voldemort the prophecy. Such incompetence. For all her breeding, the witch screamed the same as any Muggle woman. He needed to hurt her, kill her – *anyone* – Voldemort began to pace, his heart filling with unleashed fury and despair at a world which continually, spitefully denied him Harry Potter.

"No, I - wait, please -"

The hisses sounded disjointed and desperate in the silence of the dormitory. Harry fought to remember that he was alone - that this was Voldemort's fury, not his own - but it was very difficult when it was

inside of him like that, so very near to his own emotions. Gritting his teeth, Harry tried to force his own calm back through the connection. He shut his eyes and remembered the way that Voldemort had felt in his arms, the way that Voldemort had held him as he'd come down from his own fit of rage; he surrounded the foreign space inside his soul with every ounce of goodwill that he possessed.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered frantically, his fingers fisting into the sheets. He wished very badly that he were with the Dark Lord now, to soothe his temper back down to a level that was, at the very least, not quite so homicidal. *"You were only trying to be kind, and I had to go and botch it all up. But - but the last bit was still nice, wasn't it? Please."* His helplessness was back full-force; the brief power he had gained during the dream had shattered upon their ascent to reality.

Memory bit sharply into Voldemort's mind; the intimacies of slumber, of being coiled up in each other's skin, the room bright with Potter's presence, and his tender worship of Voldemort's flesh. *The last bit was still nice, wasn't it?* The voice in his mind was accompanied by a soothing calm that settled upon his temper like salve. Potter was doubtless trying to protect others from his anger, but the Dark Lord could not find it within himself to care, devouring whatever emotion was there to be salvaged at the end of this long night.

He lowered himself back into his chair, tangling his hands together, trying to remember the paths the boy's touches had taken up and down his long digits and palms. *You said we were destined to kill each other... if those were the seer's words then the prophecy must be void. For I shall never kill you and, in order to achieve my death, you must already be dead - so you shall never have an opportunity to kill me.* Voldemort's half-closed eyes glittered. The anger was still there, but if he laid his head very still, he could hear Potter breathing beside him.

Neither shall live while the other survives. Trelawney's voice echoed eerily in Harry's head. The image of her likeness rising up out of Dumbledore's Pensieve last spring had been burned permanently in his memory; the thought that it might truly be void - that his incessant anxiety over the course of the summer, his dread for the inevitable, might be for naught - filled him with tremendous relief.

He remembered Voldemort so easily surrendering the lives of so many children to Harry's wandering fingertips. Perhaps (*hope, hope*) neither of them would need to die to stop the killing after all.

"I wish that none of it mattered," Harry murmured, settling back against his pillows; his soft, sleepy hisses were almost lost in a drawn-out yawn. The letter was still open in his lap, and he couldn't resist running the tips of his fingers over the beautiful penmanship again. But his eyes lingered on the sentence that had so preoccupied his thoughts, and his breath caught in his throat. "And sometimes... sometimes I wish that it was more than dreams as well."

I have learned, Harry, that a few months - however wearisome they are to endure - are not very much time when compared with eternity. Patience, my treasured one. Still, perhaps... The words were as much for Voldemort as they were for his Horcrux, almost as though he were talking softly to himself. It was the satisfaction of Potter's confession which allowed the Dark Lord to relax into his armchair and his plans for the future. Trust, yes, Potter was beginning to trust him. His thin mouth curved upwards into a taut, greedy leer.

If my memory serves, there is one more Hogsmeade outing before Yule, is there not?

Harry's heart leapt into his throat. "Could you really?" he breathed, slipping back into English in his excitement. "But - how exactly -?" He had a feeling that Lord Voldemort making an appearance in Hogsmeade village for a lunch date with Harry Potter would not go over well with either his friends or the professors charged with his safekeeping. He felt a twinge of guilt over even allowing himself to contemplate the idea; Dumbledore and the rest of the Hogwarts' faculty were working very hard to keep the students safe, escalating security measures around the castle so that the school currently resembled more of a prison than an educational facility. But his guilt was overridden with a fresh wave of resentment for Dumbledore - Dumbledore, who had lied to Harry, who had kept all manners of important information from him, who was about to abandon him forever without so much as a single warning.

Voldemort had promised he wouldn't harm anyone under the age of seventeen. Surely it couldn't hurt to keep the Dark Lord docile in the meanwhile - and in his heart, Harry knew that he would find a way regardless.

Because above all else, Harry *wanted*. He had never wanted so badly in his life.

"There's one this weekend." Harry forced his words back into

Parseltongue; the first beams of sunrise were beginning to seep through the cracks of his bed-curtains. *"But I don't have my wand, or even my broom - and it's not exactly like you can just come meet me in the square."*

Why should I not? Did you not receive Lord Voldemort's note? The best plans are those which rely upon hiding in plain sight. Yes, await me in the square. And Harry could feel that a plan was already forming in Voldemort's manic, eager thoughts. *In the meantime, there are things which require my attention. But should you need me, my treasure, you have only to call and Lord Voldemort shall answer.*

Hiding in plain sight? Harry's mind immediately leapt to the image of Voldemort disguised as the besotted old woman of Ron's imagining, and he had to fight not to burst into laughter. But all thoughts of laughter - of anything whatsoever, really - left him when Voldemort's spirit flooded through his senses, surrounding him, a gentle cocoon of completion.

Harry sagged back into his pillows, all the tension rushing out of his bones upon his next exhale. *"The square,"* he murmured sleepily in agreement; with the comfort of Voldemort's mind encompassing his own, he found that it was very easy for him to feel tired again. *"Will you..."* He yawned, curling into himself atop his comforter, remembering only last minute to speak in Parseltongue. *"Will you stay with me until I fall asleep? Like this."* He wrapped his arms around himself, settling into the warm, safe swathes of the Dark Lord's mind. "S'nice."

Harry Potter's trust was not far from Lord Voldemort's mind as he walked through the snow, gliding under solemn trees. They made him think of naked black claws reaching up, tangling their stark silhouettes with the pale winter sky. The Dark Lord, in his obscuring cloak, was simply one more shadow in the empty wood: the long fingers hidden by well-lined leather gloves and the serpentine face lost within the deep hood of his cloak.

Will you stay with me until I fall asleep? The little ones at the orphanage had often asked such things of the older children, eager to make parents of them. Deluded, desperate fools. Of course, Voldemort had remained with Potter. *Am I too attached to the boy... too indulgent?* He had paid a high price for those few, dreaming caresses. Lord Voldemort did not forget Potter's demand.

But his pureblood followers would approve of the chance for their own progeny to grow before taking their vows to serve the Dark Lord. As for Voldemort, he did not care one way or the other. It was a slight loss of leverage, but there was only one wizard under the age of seventeen who was truly of interest to him. Besides, Potter only had the power to make bargains while Dumbledore lived to protect him.

A few ramshackle cottages stood in the clearing. The old structures seemed stooped, almost groaning under the snow. They rattled in the wind. Two ragged wizards stood outside, perhaps keeping watch, shivering and rubbing their hands over a small ball of spellfire in a jar. *Pathetic*. Voldemort wordlessly cast a Disillusionment Charm, tapping his shoulder with his wand, and quietly moved close enough to overhear their conversation, his booted feet not touching the ground.

"We-ell, what d'ya expect, Remus? Maybe wi'out Greyback ye'd have a chance, but..."

"They can't really believe You-Know-Who will keep his promise?"

"About improvin' our lot? We supported 'im in his last war an' that's enough for most. The Ministry sure ain't interested in improvin' our lot..."

"Dumbledore-"

"Oh, sure, Dumbledore, what's 'e ever done for us, then? Wasn't interested in findin' you another job, was 'e?"

"I wouldn't expect-"

In a way, it was almost a shame. The werewolves were desperate for anyone who would improve their station. But Voldemort's bargain had been with Greyback and dependent upon the Dark Lord allowing the man his pick of children, and right now Potter could offer more to Voldemort than Greyback's rag-tag forces.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Voldemort's cold, high voice made the two wolves jump as they suddenly saw the cloaked stranger who had been observing them. "I am seeking a werewolf by the name of Fenrir Greyback."

"E's inside. You ain't no wolf. Piss off."

"Tell him that Lord Voldemort wishes to speak with him," scarlet

glinted from beneath the hood of Voldemort's cloak. The was a yelp rather like a kicked dog, and one of the wolves scrabbled off through the snow towards one of the hovels, leaving Voldemort with Remus Lupin, who had the amusingly pompous expression of one who believes he is about to sell his meagre, unimportant life dearly. "I am not going to kill you, werewolf." Voldemort sniffed, eyeing the wizard's miserable little conjured fire with distain. "I merely require you to watch."

And there was Greyback, poking his blunt nose around the door, a surprised look on the vicious face beneath matted, grey hair. Yellow teeth bared a smile, "My Lord!"

Voldemort executed him like the animal he was, without the dignity due to a wizard. A simple Slicing Hex across the throat. "Let that be a lesson," he said softly over the silence of Greyback's blood seeping into the deep snow, "to those who would fail Lord Voldemort. Our bargain is at an end." He disappeared.

The Dark Lord knew that Greyback would never have agreed to cease preying upon children. Easier by far to simply end the wolf's life under the auspices of some mysterious failure. To his Death Eaters he would simply say that, as they were soon to be the rulers of Wizarding Britain, they must act in accordance with the dignity of such rank, and focus their attentions on infiltrating the Ministry of Magic. The order to cease killing underage wizards would be slipped in amongst other instructions. Voldemort could not afford to look weak.

Was it weakness to allow his Horcrux such power? He shook his head, the corners of his thin mouth curving mirthlessly upwards, remembering his words to Potter: *a few months - however wearisome they are to endure - is not so very much time when compared with eternity*. Potter would come to him, willingly, and then all bargains would be at an end.

Sunday morning brought with it anxiety unprecedented. It had not been until the morning after that Harry had begun to think this whole thing was a very bad idea, and he'd been occupied with nothing but nauseating dread ever since. Harry had invited Voldemort into Hogsmeade Village; he was placing the lives of dozens of students in danger if the Dark Lord did not live up to their agreement. And what about Harry's life? What if the Chosen One showed up in Hogsmeade's square only to be snatched away by Lord Voldemort forever, fated to an eternity in a dark, blood-slicked cellar while Voldemort laughed

and laughed over Harry's foolishness?

But then he would remember the pathetic dream-baby gasping for air in his arms, or Voldemort melting beneath him in front of a crackling fireplace. It couldn't be a trick - Harry was sure of it. There was far too much affection in Voldemort's whispers and fervent touches for a boy that he loathed so utterly. Intimacy was just as unlikely a weapon in the Dark Lord's arsenal as pity.

This did not stop Harry from spending the rest of the week leading up to the trip with something bordering very close on hysteria. A part of Harry was afraid that he had completely invented Voldemort's kindness in the delirium of their shared dream, and that his delusions of a gentle, benign Dark Lord would be shattered irrevocably by another physical confrontation much like their last encounter. By the time Sunday morning rolled around, he was so nervous that he was startling at every shift in the shadows; and when Ginny carried him a letter at breakfast from Dumbledore, requesting that they restore their private lessons the following night, he was ready to sprint back to his dormitory and refuse to emerge from his bed for the rest of the day.

"I think it's a good thing," said Hermione encouragingly, while Harry tried to decide which sudden illness would be most likely to send his friends running. "It's about time we all started focusing on the bigger picture again. Dumbledore said he had more memories to show you, right?"

Harry was so shocked by the underlying message of this statement that it took him a few good moments to realize that Hermione was probably right about Dumbledore's intentions. If Dumbledore had any suspicions about Harry's plans for his trip to Hogsmeade, he would not be waiting until the night afterward to summon Harry to his office. By the time he had finished mulling over the invitation and burying his sudden panic, his friends had finished breakfast, it was time to depart for Hogsmeade, and his opportunity to escape with a devastating, contagious disease had passed.

They joined the queue in the Entrance Hall to undergo one of Filch's thorough inspections with his Secrecy Sensor. Ron grumbled his displeasure at the wait while Hermione rambled on about the school supplies she wanted to replenish during their visit; she only had six extra quills now instead of seven after her last one had snapped during that last Transfiguration test. Harry, meanwhile, was hoping half-heartedly that perhaps Voldemort had forgotten about the trip altogether, when Filch gave him a particularly sharp jab in the side.

"Potter," he spat, passing the Sensor over Harry twice for good measure. "Professor McGonagall wanted me to inform you that your entourage will be waiting for you in the village square."

Harry's eyes widened. "Pardon?"

"Official Ministry protection for the Chosen One," Filch leered.

"They've got an Auror to escort you around the village. Don't look so glum, Potter - all your dirty rule-breaking will hold till you're back in the castle."

"Really, did you expect any less?" Hermione said as they walked out into the bitterly cold October morning. "They had a whole retinue accompanying you to King's Cross. You ought to be grateful that it's just one."

Harry, however, could think of little through his rising panic. Voldemort was going to be waiting for him in the same square as an Auror - an Auror who was planning on shadowing Harry during his entire trip through Hogsmeade. The boy tried to reach out to Voldemort's mind - *you have only to call and Lord Voldemort shall answer* - but the connection was as lonely as the rest of him. They were walking straight into a trap, and there was little Harry could do about it, especially with his friends ushering him along the path as the sky darkened with the promise of inclement weather. He could only hope, as they approached the gates leading out of Hogwarts, that Voldemort truly had forgotten about their foolhardy rendezvous - or that his batty old woman disguise was damn convincing.

Part V

Lord Voldemort seldom thought of his age. He had transcended years; his alchemical flesh could be shed like snakeskin, but never would its true substance wither or decay. The Dark Lord's metamorphosis had divorced him from the lines wrought by time. His years were measured by detachment, in the growing fissure between himself and what had been his species. The boy who still bore the cruel shackle of his Muggle father's name once dreamed of becoming the greatest sorcerer in the world. Now Voldemort's abilities were feared by all, yet he could scarcely credit himself a wizard, but something truly beyond humanity. He had passed through the unimaginable and emerged irrevocably changed.

Potter's thoughts made him feel ancient. They overflowed, bubbling like a cauldron left unattended, wriggling like Ashwinders sprung from the Fiendfyre of Voldemort's own mind. The Dark Lord was no stranger to infatuation. He had often been the object of its madness. But never before had he been its intimate co-conspirator. He - who could tear through thought without regard for those whose memories he tore asunder - was hopelessly mired in his fascination with Potter's adolescent longings.

Obsession wracked him. Voldemort had ever been a creature of capricious fanaticism - of singular, fierce concentration. Stubbornly, he refused to dignify his fixation, devoting himself to his cause. But the promise of Potter's limpid eyes and scalding flesh lingered bitterly in his heart, leaving Voldemort irascible and unstable - furious at both his own enslavement and the cold absence of his precious Horcrux. The pain of his victims appeased neither the voices which hissed *weakness*, nor the ache in his mutilated soul.

Sunday dawned as cruel and biting as Voldemort's need. The Dark Lord wore an auror's face with haughty disdain. It had been a simple matter of exerting his influence: questions raised in the Wizengamot concerning Harry Potter's safety. But Voldemort gained no pleasure from the deception. It ate at his pride that he, Lord Voldemort, should be impersonating a lowly Ministry official. A task for Death Eaters, not their lord. He had already been forced to endure the mindless chatter of the Blacks' bloodtraitor niece.

Auror Rasalhague Savage was shorter than Voldemort. He was wrapped up in a darkly purple woollen cloak which Voldemort had

just about saturated in warming charms and spells to ward off the sleet, along with a thick green scarf and mittens. His blue eyes were narrowed, glaring at the foul weather as they sought amongst the students trudging toward the village square through the freezing wind. Voldemort rolled Savage's cherry wood wand between his gloved fingers, searching for his prize as he silently tested the strength of the Dragon heartstring core. His own yew wand was tucked safely away in the pocket of the auror's cloak.

Finally, his gaze alighted on a short, bespectacled student wrapped in a Gryffindor scarf, accompanied by a boy and a girl from the same house. Potter was agitated, shivering in the inclement weather, looking desperately about the snowy square.

Voldemort strode forward, lending the Auror whose transfigured face he wore an indomitable elegance as he extended a hand to Potter with a dignified nod. "Mr Potter? My name is Savage. I've been sent by the Ministry to have a care for your safety during your trip to Hogsmeade." He raised his eyebrows as Potter rudely failed to take his hand, half irritated and half amused by the boy's sly, anxious sideways glances. *You dare doubt Lord Voldemort, Harry?*

Well-mannered behaviour was about the last thing on Harry's mind as he squinted about the square through the freezing sleet, annoyed with the bits of slush that kept getting stuck on his glasses and hindering his already poor eyesight. But further squinting proved that the square was only filled with other students, slogging toward the shops and out of the brewing storm. Voldemort, disguised or otherwise, was nowhere to be seen.

"Safety." Ron snorted. "Because You-Know-Who is going to be hiding among the liquorice wands at Honeydukes."

"Be polite!" Hermione hissed, and elbowed Harry in the side. But Harry found that his mood had plummeted violently, disappointment swelling in his chest as bitter and cold as the October sleet. For all of his fears and objections, he had been looking forward to this weekend with a fierceness that was unsettling. Voldemort's absence left him hollow and aching with something akin to betrayal.

"Right, thanks. No need to introduce myself, then, I suppose," Harry muttered unhappily, finally turning to face the Auror who was most likely responsible for Voldemort's failure to turn up. "It's a good thing they sent you. I hear that Voldemort does his produce shopping here

on the weekends. Not sure how we would have managed on our own."

It was hard for him not to be resentful. He could be expected to kill the Dark Lord and save all of wizarding Britain, but they couldn't even trust him to enjoy an afternoon in the village without an Auror holding his hand? Harry knew that this Savage person was only doing his job, but this fact did not curb Harry's burning resentment for this man, this manifestation of everything Harry hated about the Ministry and their backward expectations of him.

Hermione was still glaring at him, however, so Harry finally reached out and accepted the man's handshake, loathe as he was to accept anything at all from the Ministry. But Harry's anger caught abruptly in his throat, all thoughts screeching to a halt, when his numb, gloveless fingers closed around the man's mitten. Because *there it was* - even muffled through the cloth, it was there: Harry could feel the now-familiar warmth singing through his fingertips all the way to the centre of his soul. Harry looked slowly up at Savage, really *looking* at him for the first time - and Lord Voldemort was staring back at him through a stranger's eyes, and he was really there, really truly standing right in front of him after Harry had kissed him and touched him and begged him to come down to Hogsmeade for an afternoon together.

The sheer brilliance of the disguise didn't even register through Harry's shock. "Oh," was all he could think to say, releasing the gloved fingers only when he realized that Hermione was starting to look at him strangely. But he simply couldn't stop staring. Harry did not quite know what to do now that he knew their plan had come to fruition.

"Er, right," said Ron, giving Harry a bewildered glance as he wrapped his arms around himself. "Honeydukes, then? As lovely as this is, I think we'd be better off inside."

"Please," Auror Savage's gloved hand gestured gracefully in the direction of Honeydukes as he stared intently into his Horcrux's eyes. "I do not want to interrupt your trip." His lip quirked. "Besides, I believe I should enjoy a liquorice wand, despite the dangers inherent in such a venture." Voldemort turned from Potter, raising a derisive eyebrow at the Weasley child. He did, in fact, vaguely recall liking liquorice as a boy. There had not been a confectioner in Hogsmeade when he had been at Hogwarts; it had been a case of occasionally deigning to accept offers of one or two of the sweets sent to his schoolfellows by their parents. Never more than that, lest he appear

weak. Voldemort had acquired semi-regular boxes of crystallised pineapple for Slughorn by helping Ambrosius Flume with his Transfiguration homework.

It was only when the Dark Lord had escorted the three Gryffindors into Honeydukes that he really began to regret the impetuous desire which had landed him in this predicament so unworthy of Lord Voldemort.

The sugar-scented warmth of the shop brought no relief. It simply exchanged the heavy sleet and viciously cold air for the suffocating crush and noise of two dozen greedy children. Voldemort could barely tolerate it. Their minds and their bodies pressed and jostled him. And he, long used to the distance of fearful awe and the solitude of formlessness, almost lost control in the tide of filth oppressing his senses. Voldemort longed for the twin consciousness of dreaming: himself and Potter shorn of the world and its disgusting human clutter. Their place was at his feet, pleading for his indulgence! Like a serpent in a nest of chattering, unknowing rodents, it was near impossible to contain the compulsion to -

(their swaddled bodies spread across the garish shop floor, stilled by brilliant green light; the clean, welcome satisfaction of silence; alone with his precious Horcrux)

He could feel scarlet heat leaking into his vision - a flush to the eyes - certain colours draining away from the bright confectionery wrappings as the auror's irises began to shift to the night-hunting gaze of Lord Voldemort. He trapped the change tight behind his eyelids and his mind grasped blindly for Potter's, as Voldemort attempted to latch upon some emotion which would relieve the need to *kill, kill, kill*; his fingers tight and lethal around the auror's wand.

"Harry, m'boy!" boomed a familiar voice from behind him and Savage's face twisted into something taunt, mask-like and terrible as Voldemort desperately reached for his treasure through an ever-narrowing tunnel of icy rage; the need to rip this crowd of detritus from the lives they did *not* deserve.

Harry was suddenly aware that, if he didn't act quickly, something very bad was going to happen very soon. Ron and Hermione were clearly distracted, but Harry couldn't stop looking at the man beside him - stealing sideways glancing every few moments, almost as if to reassure himself that, yes, Voldemort really *was* here. Therefore, it

was only Harry who really noticed when the air surrounding the Auror seemed to grow darker, the icy blue eyes flashing momentarily with blood before they squeezed shut altogether.

And before Harry could even think of what to do, the worst possible person chose the worst possible time to clap a heavy hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry didn't think. He simply acted. Recoiling from Slughorn's touch, he staggered sideways into the Auror, knocking Ron bodily into Hermione - "Oi, *Harry!*" - and seizing the man's wand arm to steady himself. As he grappled for balance against the taller man, Ron spluttering and Slughorn apologizing profusely, Harry's fingers grasped Voldemort's hand, slipping up to stroke the soft, human flesh above his wrist with bare fingers and using the grip to straighten himself. *It's okay, I'm here*, Harry thought frantically; he had never attempted to communicate wordlessly through their connection, but there was no time like the present. *I'm here - just focus on me.*

"Er... sorry, Professor," said Harry when he realized that Ron, Hermione and Slughorn were staring. He released his grip on Voldemort's wrist reluctantly, and only because Hermione's eyes were narrowing at the gesture with suspicion. "You... er, scared me," he went on lamely, trying both to think on his feet and assuage the Dark Lord's wrath with images from their dreamscapes - *a kiss on the palm of a skeletal hand; the nestling of a child's flat face into his jumper*. "I've been so jumpy after that day with the hostages. I - can't stop thinking about him, actually."

Harry gave a nervous laugh. Ron frowned deeply, rubbing his arm at the place that Harry had shoved into him. Harry wished desperately that he had had the foresight to suggest a meeting that did not involve Voldemort dealing with other people.

Slughorn, however, didn't seem to notice. "Ah, yes... *that* day," he said, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "But not to worry, not to worry - he can't get you here! See, they've even sent you an Auror." Slughorn offered Voldemort his toothiest grin. "And I'm sure this good man won't let anything happen to you."

Something crashed into Voldemort's side. His eyes snapped open as the force of it careened him into a stand of exploding bonbons, which immediately began emit violent *pop-pip-pip-pop* noises. The Dark Lord regained his footing with the skill of a practised duellist, wand

slashing through the air to strike at whomever dared -

- as a hand yanked his wand-arm downwards and *pulled*. Fingers grasped around his own and the chaos around him dissolved into the sublimity of connection as those same fingers slid up past the green wool glove and under the sleeve of his robes. *It's okay, I'm here*. The voice murmured from within - more than a little hysterical. *I'm here - just focus on me*. It did not halt the filth besmirching Voldemort's senses, but it calmed his mind as he sank into Potter's thoughts; pleasure singing in their joined skin. The Dark Lord longed to vanish from the cramped madness of the sweetshop and disappear into his treasure's mind, once more a creature of mist and memory.

Blue sparks shot out of Savage's wand as the boy let go of Voldemort's hand, but the Dark Lord remembered himself: stilled and stoic under everyone's gazes. But even though their physical connection had been broken, Voldemort remained anchored in Potter's consciousness and he saw Granger, Weasley, Slughorn, and every other curious pair of eyes through the lens of his Horcrux's mortification. The boy stuttered out some excuse but Voldemort could hardly hear as blissful recollections lapped at his thoughts - surrounding him - a beautiful, sensual barrier against everything foul and impure. Distantly, he marvelled at Potter's deftness of mind. Kisses and caresses enveloped Voldemort and colour rose in Savage's cheeks, accompanied by the continued *pop-pop* of bonbons exploding behind him.

The Dark Lord half-drifted back to the present when someone said the word *Auror*. Professor Slughorn came gradually into focus through the intimate fog of pleasure: an enormous ball of furry hat and overcoat smiling patronisingly up at him, the walrus moustache twitching above the old man's grin. As though he expected Voldemort to say something to fill the silence.

"Of course," Voldemort said hoarsely - blue eyes wide - after a moment's pause. He was suddenly grateful for the chilly weather which had turned everyone's faces pink.

"Very good, very good," Slughorn mused, hardly noticing the pause in the conversation. "Now then, Harry, m'boy - what on earth has been keeping you from my little dinner parties? You've missed three already!"

"Well, I've been training very hard to face Lord Voldemort, sir," said Harry gravely, even as relief washed over him that the Dark Lord in

question had still yet to curse anyone. "I don't want to take any more chances."

This had the predicted effect on Slughorn. "Oh... oh, yes, of course," he said, faltering for just a moment before gaining momentum again, much to Harry's displeasure. "Well, I'll be having another one this Monday evening - surely you can find the time to pop in -?"

"Oh, sorry, Professor," said Harry quickly, "but the Headmaster has asked me to, er, meet with him that night. Serious business. Next time, perhaps."

"Next time, indeed," Slughorn replied good-naturedly, although he did not clap Harry on the shoulder again. "A lovely afternoon to you then, Harry, Miss Granger!" And out the door he went; his departure freed up a significant portion of the shop's floor space.

"Ow," Ron said, rubbing his arm again and jumping nervously as one of the last exploding bonbons went off. "Blimey, Harry, that bloody hurt."

"Sorry," said Harry distractedly; now that Slughorn had left, his eyes were immediately drawn once more to the Auror standing beside him. He saw now with a thrill of warm, tingling pleasure that the anger had nearly vanished entirely from Savage's face; in fact, there was a decided flush splotched high on his cheekbones that Harry had definitely not noticed there before. A pleasant, squirming warmth spread through Harry's abdomen.

Ron was still scowling. "What's with you, mate? You're not yourself today."

Harry bit his lip, jerking his attention back to his friends. "Er, yeah. Just haven't been sleeping well lately, I guess." He couldn't stop looking at Voldemort; even when he forced his gaze back to Ron and Hermione, his eyes would dart surreptitiously back to the Dark Lord. "Listen, you go on without me. Er, I mean, us. I need some fresh air." And a chance to get Voldemort out of the sweetshop before he started thinking about throwing curses again. "I'll just meet you at the Three Broomsticks, alright?"

Hermione frowned at him. "Harry, it's horrible out there!" she said, but he was already halfway toward the door, throwing a single anxious glance over his shoulder to make sure Voldemort was following him. Hermione and Ron would surely forgive him if they had any idea how dangerous Auror Savage truly was. And besides, Harry thought with

that nervous fluttering in his stomach, he wouldn't mind getting away from his friends with his escort, even if just for a few minutes.

Even the bitter wind was a relief after the chaos of Honeydukes. No one was lingering out in the cold and those few cloaked figures Voldemort could see were hurrying toward their destinations.

Potter was shivering awkwardly beside him as they stood in the icy street. Thanks to Voldemort's protective magic, the boy could not freeze to death in the same way that it was impossible for Nagini to starve to death. Neither Horcrux, however, would be very happy in such circumstances. Voldemort noticed, with slight disbelief, that he could not sense any magic but his own in Potter's aura: he was being kept warm by his garments' thickness alone.

Lord Voldemort's eyes narrowed. He was forever amazed by the incompetence of wizards lesser than himself. Potter ought to be able to defend himself against the elements by now. The Dark Lord hissed under his breath and deftly cast half a dozen non-verbal charms on Potter's scarf and cloak in rapid succession.

At which point Voldemort roughly grabbed Potter's arm - ignoring the boy's questions - and dragged him around the back of the lane, beside the woodpile behind a shop selling cauldrons, casting a few more spells to ensure they were neither seen nor disturbed. The Dark Lord wrapped his arms needfully around his Horcrux. The false human tongue twisted back into a snake's thin, two-pronged instrument as it licked at Potter's lips, demanding entrance and livid, red eyes glittered brightly in Auror Savage's face; feral and thick with greed.

"What are you - where are we -"

And then Harry was suddenly enfolded in Voldemort's arms, surrounding him in *heat*, his body singing with their proximity. Harry could only stare frozen as Savage's eyes bled scarlet, the Dark Lord's mouth swooping down and claiming him, moving with desperation against his lips. "Mmpfff," the boy said, a vain attempt at a coherent sentence, and then his mouth fell open, helpless to the sensations coursing through him.

His body melted against Voldemort's, the heat of Voldemort's magic and his kisses sinking through his skin, his veins. *This* was the reason he had squirmed and anguished all week; this was why he had agreed to such a dangerous tryst in the first place. "Oh, yes," he sighed against

his mouth, but it came out muffled; he doubted if Voldemort could even understand it. This was clearly the best and only way to ward off the winter weather; if only he could summon Lord Voldemort on a regular basis to kiss the cold from his bones.

This was the reason Lord Voldemort had endured the indignities of disguise. This euphoric melding of mouths until the only space between Voldemort and Potter was the thin layer of saliva between their eager tongues. For a moment, the bliss of connection was all that existed; the fervent tide of Potter's emotions sweeping into his soul, filling the void like the sea washing into a great, empty cavern. Completion.

But then Voldemort ripped himself away, tormented by the fleeting torture of such pleasure. "*Come with me...*" he whispered eagerly, the Parseltongue misting on the air between their faces, desperate to possess and never release. *Damn patience, damn the Headmaster!* Voldemort had spent too many long years *waiting*. "I shall not force you, Harry." The gloved hand stroked Potter's flushed cheek; red eyes mesmerised - Voldemort could not look away. "Nor did I intend to ask, but I find myself..." his voice broke, lost to the bitter wind.

Green eyes widened behind the glasses, perfectly repaired by the Dark Lord's hand. A dark shiver ran through him, but Harry wasn't even feeling cold anymore.

"With you?" the boy repeated breathlessly. Although a small part of him lit up with excitement at the prospect of having Voldemort all to himself for more than these few stolen minutes behind a cauldron shop, a larger part of Harry was screaming at him to remember his place, his friends. "But where would we go?" he whispered despite himself, fingers coming up and caressing Voldemort's cheeks of their own volition, wondering how the Dark Lord's face would feel shed of the human flesh. "It - it isn't that simple."

"*It is simplicity itself...*" Voldemort murmured silkily into Harry's fingers, his scarlet eyes aglow with fierce lust. "*We may go anywhere and awaken as entwined as we are whilst sleeping.*" The anguine tongue curled and lapped at his hands which caressed the half Auror and half Dark Lord, as Voldemort's own fingers crushed Harry against him. "*You cannot lie to Lord Voldemort, Harry; he knows you desire this as much as he...*"

"Ah," Harry breathed out shakily the forked tongue ran up and down his fingers, thoroughly distracting him. Memories of their night-time encounters assailed his consciousness - Voldemort tangled up in his flesh, possessing him in the safety of their minds. "I... I do want," he admitted, his voice low and hoarse. *"I want so much it frightens me."* His eyes fell shut, and he tried to steady his breathing, to compose himself.

"But... my friends," he whispered, attempting valiantly to remember that a world existed outside the seductive flicks of Voldemort's tongue. "Ron and Hermione. They'll – they'll tell Dumbledore I've gone missing. And... and Dumbledore..." He sagged against the Auror's body, eyes still closed. Surely, no one would notice if he disappeared for just a little while? He attempted to nestle as close as humanly possible into the shining brilliance of their connection. *Perfection.* Despite his objections, Harry wouldn't have been able to tear himself away from Voldemort in this moment if his very life depended on it.

"Then *come*, my treasure..." And suddenly the auror's wand vanished and Voldemort's own yew wood wand cracked the snowy world open, and both the world and the man before him transformed as fluidly as they might in a dream -

(the broken pieces spun, tunnelling into darkness which ignited into)

- swirling flight. Shorn of his disguise, Voldemort flew high, arms wrapped tight around Harry, far above the wintry trees and fields; black robes rippling on the air like smoke on the chill wind. The ground had dissolved into cloudy skies and wind was rushing in his ears. The sensation of flight was very familiar to Harry - but without the comfort of a broomstick between his legs, Harry was utterly humbled, breathless with awe and delight.

It was like the first time he had ever ridden a broomstick. Harry gasped, clinging to the Dark Lord for dear life. Terror and adrenaline and *wonder* in its purest, most undiluted form - Harry forgot for a blissful moment where he was, whom he was with, the consequences of exactly what was happening. He grinned, elating in the rush of wintry air swirling around him, the connection between their bodies still pulsing, gaining momentum.

"You can fly!" he cried in awe, terrified and exhilarated all at once.

"Indeed." There was a hiss of amusement hidden somewhere in the

recesses of the voice as high and wintry as the sky Voldemort effortlessly traversed. "You must have realised by now that I regard so-called impossibility as a challenge." Seeing the excitement shining in Potter's eyes, the Dark Lord slid steeply downwards into an effortless dive, corkscrewing through cloud and specks of whirling snow. Voldemort usually confined such aerial acrobatics to duels, but he was pleased to indulge his Horcrux, drinking up the boy's pleasure eagerly. *Mine, utterly mine!* His cold, clear laughter mingled with Potter's whoops of glee.

Broomsticks and dreams of sea serpents were incomparable to such euphoria; the steady pump of adrenaline that usually only came with a particularly complicated manoeuvre at the very end of a game was an absolute constant here, wrapped up in Voldemort's arms, flying and spinning and looping through the clouds. Harry simply could not stop smiling, his cheeks nearly aching with the strain in the muscles there; he was shouting and laughing, his spirits as high as their flight.

And Voldemort - he was smiling as well, laughing along with Harry. His face was completely transformed this way, bright with happiness, and Harry felt a surge of affection for this man who had never known the joy of sharing something so wonderful with another person. Harry turned his head best he could in the tight embrace, pressed his lips against Voldemort's jaw, cherishing the Dark Lord's happiness. "*Kiss me again,*" he whispered to the wind that roared in his ears, to the smooth, pale flesh of Voldemort's cheek as they soared on the air.

It was impossible for Voldemort to gather a coherent thought, everything but the rush of sensation seemed lost on the air. His insides were alight with something akin to the brilliant satisfaction of defeating an accomplished witch or wizard in battle: the singing, savage joy of the rush of green light - without the accompanying fury which always fuelled such encounters.

His lipless mouth brushed Potter's as they spun through the wet vapour of a cloud. He did not want it to end. Voldemort felt a sudden fear that such happiness - seldom granted - was about to be torn away. Could one possess such pleasure forever? The Dark Lord vowed he would never allow Potter to part from him again.

They smoothly touched down in a snowy field, next to a solemn two-story house surrounded by naked, black oaks. Voldemort had decided not to take his Horcrux back to Malfoy Manor, for fear of triggering

Potter's negative memories of their last encounter there. Instead, he had elected to bring the boy to the Rookwood home, empty as Augustus was still awaiting rescue from Azkaban for his failure at the Ministry, along with Lucius. Voldemort found it a useful place to come when he grew sick of the Malfoys' ostentation. Hopefully, it would also suit Potter's tastes. "*Well, my treasure?*"

They may have been standing on solid ground again, but the thrill of the flight still lingered in Harry's veins, and Voldemort did not release him from his embrace. *My treasure.* Harry shivered again, staring up into the Dark Lord's bright, eager eyes, his fingers still fisted loosely in the taller man's robes. The reality of the moment struck him very suddenly. This was Lord Voldemort, real and powerful and dangerous. They weren't dreaming; the Dark Lord could lash out at him at any time, true, terrible torture beyond Harry's worst nightmares.

And yet... and yet Harry did not find himself afraid. The connection pulsed through his fingers, warming him, sending pleasant goose bumps across his skin. Voldemort had held him and caressed him and kissed him till he was trembling. Voldemort had shuddered in his embrace, had come apart beneath Harry's tentative fingers. Voldemort would not hurt him.

The boy ran his fingertips slowly, wonderingly, along the Dark Lord's cheek; fear and excitement mingled in his heart. "I'd... I'd like it very much if you kissed me again, I think." The words fogged between their mouths in the winter air. He stood on his tip-toes to whisper in Voldemort's ear, a secret, his heart fluttering wildly in his chest. "*And you can't wake up this time.*"

The serpentine nostrils flared in excitement as the breath of Potter's assurance tickled Voldemort's smooth skin. "Yesss..." Now there would be no more separation - he would not be parted from his Horcrux any longer. Voldemort leaned down, luxuriating into the fingers stroking his gaunt cheeks and the lips pressed against his ear, turning his head so that his mouth met Potter's; pulling eagerly at the boy's lip with his teeth. "*Harry...*" he murmured softly between kisses. "*My own precious one...*"

How astonishing it was that he had once sought to close these green eyes forever. Bound by a prophecy and strange accidents of fate which had led them inexorably to this moment. Voldemort took hold of the boy's hand - pulling it gently from its caress - and slipped his long,

spidery fingers betwixt Potter's. "Come," he glided forward, his face as pale as the snow which clung to his black cloak. A thin smile tugged at his lipless mouth and the mask of a face was illuminated by the slit-pupilled eyes which shone ruby-bright, with the feverish glee of a child.

They climbed the stone steps, the front door swinging open. Potter peered anxiously into the dark threshold, clearly reluctant to stop inside. "Where are we?"

The hall reeked of faded grandeur, dark and dust-laden. A chill gust of air whistled through the open doorway where Harry Potter stood nervously, as though he expected a legion of the Dark Lord's servants to leap out at him from the shadows of the old house. Voldemort ignited the lamps ensconced along the walls with a wave of his wand, illuminating the dark wood staircase and threadbare carpet. "We stand in the home of one of my Death Eaters. But I have left Augustus in Azkaban to meditate upon what it means to fail Lord Voldemort. No one shall disturb us here." He ushered the boy inside, closing the door soundlessly behind him.

The Dark Lord glided up the staircase, leading Potter to one of the bedrooms. It was a rather Victorian space decorated in Ravenclaw blue and bronze. Unspeakable Rookwood, Voldemort recalled, had been persuaded to join his cause by the prospect of forbidden knowledge no other wizard possessed. He moved to the hearth, busying himself with casting a fire to warm the neglected, melancholy room. Voldemort gestured to the eagle crest above the mantelpiece. "Ah see, Harry? We are in neutral territory."

"Right." Somehow, the Ravenclaw emblem did not set Harry at ease in this empty, eerie place. The house's unfamiliarity put him on edge, stripping him of the confidence that had relaxed him in their shared dreamscapes and even earlier in Hogsmeade. His eyes were drawn irresistibly to the bed, particularly the dark navy duvet thrown atop. It looked very soft and plush. His mouth grew dry as he wondered if he would be learning this detail a little more intimately in a few moments.

A fire was crackling in the hearth now, and Harry suddenly felt very warm beneath his many layers. Swallowing, he tugged off his scarf and began to undo the clasp on his winter robes - and then froze, realizing how this must look, undressing in a bedroom, alone with Lord Voldemort. He blushed deeply. "Er - sorry - I ... hope you don't

mind, it's, er, very warm in here," he stammered, feeling profoundly stupid even as the words left his mouth.

"Harry, *Harry*... you have no cause for apology," Voldemort hissed silkily as he removed his gloves, his soft voice almost lost in the crackle of the flames that sent his tall shadow looming about the edges of the room. "But where are my manners?" He turned from the fire, stepping behind Potter to take his scarf and cloak, laying the garments carefully across the back of a chair. Bending down, the Dark Lord ghosted his flat nose along the curve of neck now bare of red and gold scarf.

"I forget that you do not feel the cold as much as I." It was too tempting not to nibble at that soft, warm skin; putting his lips to the pleasure which shivered whenever they touched. His long fingers curled possessively around the boy's shoulders. "Perhaps the charms I placed upon your clothing were a trifle strong?"

A mouth brushed unexpectedly against the naked skin of Harry's neck, and the boy inhaled sharply, eyes widening. He was acutely aware of Voldemort's presence directly behind him, more so than ever before; the air between their bodies seemed to vibrate, the mouth against his nape chasing chills down his spine. *Bed*, he couldn't stop thinking, his heart pounding in his chest. *There's a bed in here, and I'm alone with Lord Voldemort, and he's – oh – he's kissing my neck.*

"Charms?" Harry repeated breathlessly, unable to prevent his head from lolling forward, giving the Dark Lord more access to his shoulders and neck. Dark waves of heat seemed to radiate through his body from where Voldemort's lips met his skin, coming to settle heavily in his lower abdomen. "Well... this... isn't exactly helping."

"Did you not notice I cast several Heating Charms on your cloak as we stepped out of the confectioners?" Each word was punctuated by a kiss or a lick of the ophic tongue. "*You were...*" the lipless mouth hissed into Potter's ear "*shivering...*" Voldemort breathed deeply against the boy; inhaling his sweaty, mammalian arousal - bewitched by the emotion which emanated from the Gryffindor's quivering flesh and seeped into his greedy soul.

"But I am not helping, as you say." Voldemort smirked, unable to resist teasing his prize. "Does this mean you would prefer it if I stopped?"

"No!" said Harry, perhaps a little too emphatically; his flush deepened when he realized how desperate he must sound. He swallowed and tried again, but his voice was still not entirely steady. "Don't stop, please. This is ... very nice."

Leaning back against the Dark Lord for support, he raised trembling fingers to his robes, brushing against the buttons fastening them together. *Get it together, Potter.* The connection shivered between their bodies as he rested his head against Voldemort's shoulder. Gathering his courage, Harry turned his face to look up at Voldemort through his lashes.

"I'm - wearing a lot of layers," Harry breathed. "Shouldn't we address that first?"

"Perhaps you are right..." Voldemort reached long fingers down Harry's front, fabric wandlessly dissolving under milky claws which scratched and slid needfully against the flesh abruptly unveiled. Harry gave a rather undignified yelp, eyes widening in surprise - he had only been referring to his robes, after all - as his entire outfit seemed to simply unravel from his body. *"A stroke of brilliance on your part, Harry."*

Well, then, McGonagall had certainly never taught them *that* particular spell in Transfiguration. The warm air of the bedroom brushed against his naked skin, and Harry gaped down at himself, face brighter than a cherry, as he realized that he had only been left in the ugly bright orange knickers Fred and George had bought him for his last birthday.

Voldemort either didn't notice or didn't care. Long, elegant hands smoothed down Harry's chest, and the boy arched into them before he could help himself, his skin thrilling at their touch. No one had ever touched him like this, and Harry realised that he really quite liked it, that he would like Voldemort's clever fingers to intoxicate every inch of his skin in this way. "Oh," he sighed, hands flexing uselessly at his sides, his burning cheek pressing into the Dark Lord's shoulder. "Oh, keep doing that."

Voldemort might have fallen into the senses of the snakes he had once possessed. Taste became the scents of the boy arching in his arms. With his nostrils dilate and tongue extended, the Dark Lord explored Potter: stroking and licking every part of the boy possible, covering his Horcrux with the mark of his saliva whilst whispering possessive

endearments across all the flesh he touched.

Caressing with Parseltongue as deftly as he did with his long-fingered hands, Voldemort began the only mating ritual he had ever experienced. Sight became heat: the mesmerising warmth that emanated from Potter kept the Dark Lord wound as close as possible, unable to separate himself from the soft skin which sparked and exulted with his own immortal magic.

Now he was neither a formless spectator crouching in the minds of serpents', nor was this entwining blunted by the surreality of dreams. It had a rawness; a stark sensuality that made him as breathless as the homunculist infant he had been. Potter's skin was painted gold by the firelight, shadows guttering across its dips and arches as it quivered in Voldemort's embrace. Jet-black hair brushed the Dark Lord's face, still wet with snow.

Harry had never been so aware of every inch of his body, a sprawling expanse of quivering skin and muscle. His skin seemed to be supercharged with nerves, trembling wherever Voldemort's lips and nails brushed and caressed. The Dark Lord's fingers seemed determined to learn every bit of him, and Harry, who had never before looked at his body with anything other than awkward embarrassment, who had always hurried to change after Quidditch games and cover himself after showers out of mortification for unfamiliar limbs that were growing with uncomfortable speed, had never felt more appealing, more cherished. So *this* was what bodies were for - this beautiful, intimate worship of another's mouth on his flesh, the pleasure that lit up his nervous system from head to curling toes.

It took a colossal effort simply to part himself from Potter's warmth for the few moments it took to divest himself of his own clothing. He had never done this before - outside of their dreams - and he found himself possessed of an odd nervousness that had never materialised within their shared visions. Perhaps it was merely the chilly air or the strange expression on Potter's face. Voldemort resisted the impulse to read the boy's mind (he did not wish to turn this into a conflict, nor for Potter to be given access to his own thoughts).

Shorn of his dark robes, Voldemort was gleaming alabaster wrapped brutally tight around sharp bone. Close up, fine deltas of blue-purple lines ran beneath his near-translucent, pearly skin as though they were

veins in marble rather than flesh. His body seemed as waxen and inhuman as his face: without nipples or any evidence of the cord that had once linked him to his mother. His sex was long, thin and as hairless as the rest of his cold skin: white ending in dusky, veined blue. Without the majestic wings of his robes, Voldemort was a wraith, the clawed fingers of his left hand still holding his wand of yew, reluctant to discard his weapon even when all else lay in a pool of black around his pale feet.

It was only when Voldemort pulled away that Harry realized that his eyes had fallen shut, his lips parted with shallow breaths. But when he opened them, he could only stare in silent awe. Lord Voldemort, the greatest, most powerful Dark wizard of their time was baring his body completely before him, before *Harry*. Green eyes grew huge as they took in the Dark Lord's emaciated figure – Harry could see the sharp outline of a frail ribcage beneath the stretched, milky skin, so thin for a body that held so much power. His gaze followed the line of the Dark Lord's lean stomach down, down, and Harry found himself blushing anew, his mouth forming a small 'o' of surprise. He simply could not stop *staring*.

And then he shook himself. What was he doing? He remembered the soft admission Voldemort had given him during their last dream and suddenly felt like slapping himself. The Dark Lord had never done anything like this before, and here Harry was, gaping at his naked body like a fish. Swallowing, Harry took a hesitant step forward, closing the small distance that had grown between them when Voldemort had pulled away. He trailed his fingers delicately down the Dark Lord's hairless chest, flesh smooth and cool beneath his touch; a shiver ran through his body, so warm in the firelight.

"I want to touch you." His voice was low and strange after Voldemort's slow, meticulous exploration of his own naked torso. The boy leaned forward, placing a gentle, open-mouthed kiss on the soft flesh of Voldemort's throat. His fingers glided down the Dark Lord's bare arm, ghosting feather-light across his wrist; they ran tenderly along the fingers still clutching the wand, as if asking for permission. "Let me touch you."

You may, Lord Voldemort remembered the words that had come so easily in their shared dream. Yet now they were lodged in his throat, unspoken. How different it was to stand together in Rookwood's room than to linger embraced in the shared space between thoughts. Potter's

fingers stroked gently over his left hand; warm and filled with promise both imaginable and unimaginable. The Dark Lord had sworn never to be parted from his wand of yew and here was Harry Potter - still his enemy in so many ways - rendering Voldemort's hand so very pliant beneath his touch. Had he not stolen Potter's own wand in just such a situation? To discard one's weapon even for a moment... Voldemort remembered James and Lily Potter, so foolish as to leave aside their wands, imagining themselves safe. His fingers tightened their grip beneath their son's ministrations.

There was no reply; in fact, Voldemort's entire body seemed to tense with Harry's proximity. Something clenched inside the boy's chest. Was he doing something wrong? Perhaps he had stared too rudely or for too long. Or perhaps - he remembered their last dream with a furious blush - Voldemort had found his behaviour vulgar and childish that night. The Dark Lord had, after all, been the one to awaken, pulling their mingling minds apart from each other once Harry had climbed atop him.

Harry's face fell, cheeks burning with mortification as he moved to step away - but then he caught sight of the white-knuckled grip of Voldemort's fingers about the polished yew wand. His gut reaction was an intense flash of anger. Voldemort had spent the better part of a decade and a half trying to murder him - Voldemort had robbed Harry of his own wand and imprisoned him only weeks before - and yet Harry had followed him willingly to the home of a Death Eater, extended the Dark Lord his faith for reasons unfathomable. The least that Voldemort could do was offer Harry a little trust in return.

But as the boy looked defiantly up into Voldemort's crimson eyes, he found his resentment faltering. A voice that sounded oddly like Hermione reminded him that Lord Voldemort had never had reason to trust anyone before. Voldemort was a tyrant, a killer - his relationships were based on fear, not faith. *He's never done anything like this before.*

Harry pulled his fingers away from the Dark Lord's hand. Gathering his Gryffindor courage, he reached up slowly and touched a pale cheek. "Voldemort," said Harry, his voice dark and soft; the forbidden name seemed even more dangerous when uttered inches from its owner's lips. "I won't force you. I only wanted to show you how nice you make me feel. And besides," he grinned softly, a shy, embarrassed turn of his lips, "you, er, don't exactly need a wand to make me utterly useless. If you haven't already noticed."

I won't force you. The echo of his own reassurance to Potter struck Voldemort almost as though it were a physical blow. As if, upon their disappearance from Hogsmeade, this wandless child had not placed himself completely in Voldemort's hands! No one knew where they were - in all likelihood the staff of Hogwarts were still unaware that Potter was missing. The serpentine nostrils flared; taunt displeasure flitting across the flat, waxen face, though it vanished almost immediately beneath Voldemort's mask-like features. The only reason the Dark Lord suffered such insolence was because the illusion of control was what kept his Horcrux docile and willing to trust himself to the most powerful Dark wizard in living memory.

A warm hand was gentling Voldemort's hollow cheek, but it inspired no tenderness within him. Rather, he longed to seize it and punish Potter for his audacity - force the boy call him by his title and to acknowledge Voldemort as his lord and master. Yet something in him thrilled to hear his chosen name on Potter's lips. *Voldemort*. He wanted to hear its syllables hitched across gasping pleasure. Hear it hissed in breathless, pleading abandon.

The Dark Lord's façade slipped smoothly back across his features - utterly self-assured. Slowly, slowly, Voldemort reached out to place his cherished wand of yew on the bedside table. The sanguine eyes narrowed, glaring dire warning. There was an almost imperceptible tremble in the long, white fingers as they pulled away.

"I took your wand to render you helpless before Lord Voldemort," the Dark Lord said. His cold, eerie voice was quiet, as though Voldemort were musing to himself. Firelight glittered in livid crimson as he stared into the flames. "Yet it remained in my possession because it was a piece of you I could touch in your absence. You cannot know how many times I held that wilful holly wand, Harry, thinking of this moment..." His voice softened, becoming almost gentle. "You shall have it returned to your keeping."

He stepped forward - placing his body between Potter and the yew wand - the empty claw of his left hand coming up to caress Potter's chin in a reassertion of control, leaning forward to hiss into the boy's ear. *"But I do not quite understand your meaning, Harry. You refer, perhaps, to the intimidating effect I have upon you?"* The words were silken. Voldemort's lipless mouth quirked with faint amusement - playing at coy ignorance.

Harry could hardly suppress a shiver at the resumption of Voldemort's caress, the hiss that carried both threat and promise against the suddenly sensitive lobe of his ear. He swallowed and shifted nervously on his feet. The air was a lot chillier without Voldemort's mouth trailing fire across his naked body. "You - certainly have an effect on me. I already told you how much it scares me. You... you have so much power over me, and I..." He faltered, swallowing again, unable to find the words to finish his thought.

"What is it?" Voldemort asked, avid for Potter's confession. The Dark Lord wanted more of the stuttering, fearful words eked out by the beautiful lips of his Horcrux. *Harry Potter* acknowledging his terror of Lord Voldemort's power - *Harry Potter* trembling beneath his hands. He took the boy into his arms, resting his chin against the messy black hair. Lazy fingers stroked over the boy's back. Now came tenderness, blossoming from Potter's fear and awe. "*Tell me...*"

"I..." Harry sucked in a deep breath, the dance of spidery fingers along his spine spurring tendrils of liquid warmth curling through his abdomen. It was intoxicating and distracting. "I can't think while you're doing that," he admonished softly, resting his forehead against the bare curve of the Dark Lord's shoulder with a shudder. He took a deep breath and tried again. "What I mean is... I can't do much of anything when - when you're this close. You could kill me right now. You could do anything you wanted. And I..." he took a deep breath, eyes falling shut on the exhale, his voice very soft, "I couldn't stop you."

"*You know what you are to Lord Voldemort,*" he murmured, smoothing Potter's hair as he might stroke Nagini's scales. "I fear that continued sentimentality on my part would bore you. Suffice it to say that your death is no longer necessary. Quite the contrary, in fact."

The Dark Lord sighed, gently pulling the boy's head back, his pale, lipless mouth lingering a hair's breadth from the famous curse scar - the moment which tore both their lives asunder and reweave their destinies, binding them together for eternity. Voldemort kissed the pulsing centre of the connection: no longer simply the cause of his exile, but the repository of that which was most important and precious.

A soft chuckle whispered across Potter's forehead. "*Harry, Harry...* what terrifies you are not my desires but your own. The true question,

inasmuch as I can divine, is what you would not *wish* to stop me doing to you, my brave Gryffindor." The tip of a long, white finger touched the boy's lips, the Dark Lord's cat-like eyes gleaming with illicit promise. "*Ask, and Lord Voldemort shall provide...*"

Harry's mouth fell open with slack-jawed pleasure as a thin mouth pressed against his scar. A powerful, dizzying rush of sensation coursed through him with an intensity that was almost painful, bound to the place where Voldemort's lips made contact with the raw skin on his forehead. It was disconcerting. Harry had only ever associated his scar with searing pain, an indicator of Voldemort's immense displeasure and hatred. Never did Harry imagine that it could buzz with such overwhelming *satisfaction*, an addicting, aching pleasure that made his body rigid and his lips tremble and his swarming thoughts still as if frozen.

He very nearly didn't notice when Voldemort began speaking again. *Ask?* The meaning of the Dark Lord's words caught up with him very quickly, and Harry's eyes widened, tongue darting out to nervously lick his lips and accidentally touching the finger pressed there. "I..." Harry was so very close to naked, and Voldemort had completely shed his robes, and there was a *bed* only a few feet away! How could Voldemort expect him to think coherently in such a situation? "I've never exactly... done anything like this before," he whispered shakily against the long, elegant digit. His eyes squeezed shut; he still hadn't answered the question. "But - I suppose that I - I do wish you wouldn't keep stopping."

High laughter split the air as long fingers gestured and Voldemort's Horcrux was wandlessly deposited onto the blue coverlets with a surprised yelp. Stripped of even the rustle of his robes, Voldemort moved in complete silence, as if his bare feet did not touch the old carpet. He stood over Potter at the end of the bed, his glowing scarlet eyes and sharp, colourless face utterly transfixed with greed.

Lord Voldemort had never really considered the object of intimacy aside from procreation; the idea of sexual acts had, for the majority of his life, left him cold. Yet he was not quite as inexperienced as Potter. Voldemort immediately summoned to mind what resources were available to him. Apart from slipping into the twisting couplings of serpents, there were memories not his own which the Dark Lord could call upon. Bertha Jorkins - the mind he had ripped apart thought by thought - and Quirrel, whose fantasies Voldemort had plucked in

order to torment the foolish wizard with his own weakness.

His technique was thus a patchwork of others' pleasures. Voldemort sucked and nibbled at Potter's toes - which dear, dead Bertha had once enjoyed courtesy of a one-night engagement with Ludovic Bagman. Sharp teeth bit into Potter's taut calves as Voldemort flicked his tongue possessively in the manner of a male snake caressing a female, and lean, milky fingers pulled down Potter's garish undergarments to wrap around his Horcrux's sex - as poor, deluded Quirrel had once imagined the pleasing, teasing hands of a faceless boy.

Voldemort did not even give him the chance to be nervous. Only moments after Harry had been unceremoniously dumped onto the bed, the Dark Lord descended on his feet, kissing and nipping at his toes - and *oh*, did that tickle! Harry had no sooner begun to giggle with mortifying girlishness than Voldemort had moved up his legs, stroking and licking up the curve of his calves to his naked, quivering thighs. The object of this meticulous journey was obvious, but this made it no less of a shock - and certainly no less arousing - when Voldemort emerged at the boy's waistline and yanked down his pants without another word.

The unexpected pleasure of real, clever fingers taking him in their grip caused Harry to bite down a cry of surprise. No one had ever touched him down there, like that, with the intention of - of - Harry's breath stuttered out in an exhale, teeth digging into his bottom lip almost painfully. Not even in their dreams, when Voldemort had kissed him and touched him and they had lain half-naked together in the grassy clearing, had the Dark Lord's hands gone anywhere below his waistline, and, "*Ahhh -!*" Harry could not imagine that, even if they had, it would feel anything like the burning reality of their touch on him at this very moment.

"Oh," gasped Harry, unable to keep still. His fingers fisted into the duvet as much as for lack of anything else to grasp as their sudden and fierce need to do so; his hips squirmed restlessly as he struggled not to thrust up into those beautiful, beautiful fingers.

It was seraphic. To Voldemort, the air hummed with Potter's arousal. Magic danced between their bodies in the wake the Dark Lord's caresses as the silent, third participant rejoiced. The shard of soul exulted at the friction between himself and its vessel and, for a moment, Voldemort glimpsed its shadow coiled up in their pleasure.

It was as he had been that night: the youngest and oldest of his Horcruxes but for dear Nagini. Yet his skin was raw and flayed; limbs broken and atrophied from the torture of spending so many years clinging to Potter without true attachment.

And Voldemort's efforts became softer, more solicitous as he touched the two beings gasping beneath him. The Dark Lord understood agonies of cruel displacement; this piece of his soul had been torn abruptly from him, just as he had been ripped from his body.

The lipless mouth closed around Potter's orifice while Voldemort's hands continued to wander; nails trailing across the boy's chest. His crimson eyes flickered shut as the serpentine tongue lapped and curled around hard flesh. Magic buzzed in his mouth, as the Horcrux shuddered eagerly along with Potter, and Voldemort sighed through flat, slitted nostrils as their happiness slid into his own meagre sliver of soul. He choked slightly, losing Bertha's rhythm, dizzy with feeling.

Their connection grew into something almost tangible when fingers were replaced with a wicked tongue, surrounding the most sensitive part of his body with sparking, exhilarating magic. Harry's cries were lodged soundlessly in the back of his throat, his spine arching in a perfect curve as his body adjusted to the intensity of this new sensation - an invisible, insistent string stretched taut between where Voldemort's mouth encompassed him and the centre of his scar. For the first time, he could truly *feel* the piece of Voldemort that was embedded inside of his soul, delighting as much in the sheer *nearness* of its originator as Harry was in the potency of the Dark Lord's ministrations.

Possessed with the sudden urge to be touching some - any - part of Voldemort's body, Harry raised shaking fingers to skim the smooth, pale head. He forced himself to open his eyes, watching with amazement as Lord Voldemort licked and sucked between his legs, bent on intensifying the pleasure that was thrumming to a steady crescendo in Harry's veins.

It occurred to Harry that there should be something very wrong with this - this was the Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort, mass murderer, all-around sadistic psychopath - but he could only dredge up something disturbingly close to affection for this person that so clearly cared for Harry's pleasure, Harry's happiness. He wondered distantly how he could have ever been afraid of this man. He saw now that Voldemort would never hurt him again.

Claws scraped across Harry's abdomen at that moment, and the cries that had been stuck in his throat were torn from his lips in a rush of incoherence. His fingers tightened marginally against Voldemort's head, and he tried very hard to resist the impulse to thrust upward, aware that this would be a very rude thing to do when Voldemort was trying so hard to make him feel good. "Ngggh," Harry bit out, head tossing to the side, unable to keep his eyes open any longer. His face was completely flushed, dark hair damp with snow and sweat; his breathing was shallow and laboured. It was with a rush of mortification that he realized he was not going to last very long at this rate. "Oh, you - y-you have to stop, or I'll - I'll - "

Voldemort hardly heard Potter's whimpering cries. Power arced around them as the piece of errant spirit flailed between their bodies, forming a conduit of building intensity that entwined all three souls in a trio of seething abandon - blind to anything but sensation. Potter was the strongest: blazing with emotion and allied to the Horcrux within him which magnified the boy's feelings with its own striving desire. It was Voldemort who was weak here, at the mercy of a storm of feeling. His soul was the smallest: a scant, lonely remnant of what once was.

Yet, for once, this weakness did not trouble him. He was lost to the waves of pleasure; mesmerised - swept away by the beauty of emotions he did not understand. It was impossible to stop. Mechanically, he forced his mouth to continue, conscious only of a bright, shimmering pulse which grew and grew until the world twisted with an abrupt, astonishing split akin to apparition. But instead of opening his eyes into another place, Voldemort was still lying on Rookwood's bed with Potter, but it was coloured with a lazy film of pleasure and he could hardly summon the strength to move.

There was stickiness between his own legs and, as Voldemort slowly raised his head, opaque liquid dribbled from the lipless mouth, almost as pale as the chin it trickled down. Red eyes blinked wonderingly at Potter. After a moment, Voldemort lay back down beside his prize, as thoughtless and still as a snake sunning itself on a summer's day.

Gradually, the dull, Ravenclaw colours of the bedroom came back into focus through the fog that had enveloped Harry's climax. His entire body was shaking, his mouth still dangling agape as his heartbeat slowly, slowly climbed back down to an ordinary level. The boy opened his eyes, startling when he saw that the fog surrounding his

senses was actually quite literal - before he realized that his glasses had steamed up during their lovemaking.

Lovemaking. Was that what this was, had been? Confusion registered dimly in the back of Harry's mind, but the rest of him seemed determined to disregard it entirely. His body had never felt so relaxed, so at peace. It was as though every muscle in his body had been stretched taut and then released, transformed into supple, useless limbs of jelly. Now was not the time to ponder the conflicting emotions that threatened to overtake his thoughts.

Carefully, the boy reached up and removed his spectacles. His gaze met with Voldemort's, for once naked of their guarded mask, full of awe and tranquillity. He saw with a blush that a milky substance was dripping from the edge of the Dark Lord's mouth, concrete, physical proof of exactly what had just transpired. It was with an even darker blush that he noticed the mess spread across Voldemort's own stomach as well. Taken with sudden fascination, Harry reached forward and wiped the sticky fluid from Voldemort's chin, licking it off his fingers without giving it a second thought. He softly kissed the rest away from the Dark Lord's mouth with his lips and tongue, a strikingly intimate gesture that made his heart pound almost as harshly as it had a few moments ago.

"Wow," Harry murmured quietly against the sharp line of Voldemort's jaw, his voice rough with overuse. Curling up alongside the body beside him seemed like the only natural thing to do, and so Harry did, taking care not to deliberately touch too much of Voldemort's skin - the Dark Lord had, after all, never truly given Harry permission to touch him. "Wow, that was ..." The boy could not resist gently trailing his fingers across Voldemort's sternum, his eyes wide with astonishment. "Brilliant." He looked back up into Voldemort's gaze. "Is it - is it like that with everyone?"

Warm fingers came for Voldemort, wiping the dripping fluid from his face. He was as indifferent to the mess of their pleasure as a serpent is to the blood and membrane which spill across his scales when his fangs sink into a bird's egg. The Dark Lord heard the slick sound of a tongue - as if from far off - and suddenly Potter's lips were at the edge of his mouth; that same tongue cleaning and caressing. Voldemort let out a soft hiss under his breath, idly half-closing his eyes and pulling his precious Horcrux closer, content to let Potter's hand stroke across his concave stomach. It felt strange and pleasing to be touched there, where one's own touch hardly ever strayed.

Is it - is it like that with everyone?

A spike of irritation disturbed Voldemort's repose - to think that anyone else could experience such a thing! *Hardly*, he thought derisively, tightening his possessive grip on the boy. "I do not know..." he replied quietly, unwilling to upset the peace by speaking his mind as he fought his anger at the idea of Potter wrapped in the arms of any other creature.

Harry smiled softly, nestling his face into Voldemort's shoulder. "I'll bet it's not," he whispered sleepily, fingers slipping down to trace the defined ridges of the Dark Lord's ribcage. The arm holding him close made Harry feel safe; no harm could ever come to him here. "We're something special." He sighed happily. His skin tingled everywhere with satisfaction, and he wondered how long two people could lie in bed together like this, not quite sleeping but not quite awake. Harry felt like he could stay here all afternoon, all night, even.

A knot suddenly tightened in his stomach at this thought, temporarily dispelling his good feelings. The faces of his two best friends swam before his mind's eye, and he abruptly recognized the icy sensation in his gut for guilt. He had told Ron and Hermione that he would meet them in a few minutes' time at the Three Broomsticks - they were probably worried sick about him by now. Harry could only slip away for so long before he risked their summoning a professor - or worse, Professor Dumbledore.

"Perhaps we should head back soon," said Harry softly, propping himself up on an elbow to look Voldemort in the eye. "It's been at least an hour now - they'll start to suspect." The boy's fingers lingered against the Dark Lord's chest, revelling in their connection for just a little longer.

Crimson eyes widened, shock poisoning the pleasure of their closeness. Voldemort's features were suddenly taut and coldly furious. "*What?*" The word was a deadly hiss that seemed to go on after being spoken, lingering unpleasantly in the silence. The temperature of the room plummeted several degrees in the space of a heartbeat.

Harry blinked, utterly bewildered by the unexpected shift in Voldemort's disposition. "Back to - er, to Hogsmeade." The words came out in a stammer; Harry found himself suddenly unsure. He sat up, his pulse picking up at an alarming rate as the beginnings of panic, so

unwelcome in the serenity of their coupling, began to swirl in his stomach. "Ron and Hermione - they're - they're waiting for us, remember? If we're gone for too long ... they might go and find Dumbledore."

"And what will your *precious* Headmaster do then?" Voldemort spat, livid eyes glittering savagely. "Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody of our plan." The slitted nostrils flared. "I am *not* afraid of Dumbledore, Harry. He is not long for this world. If he comes for you, I shall stamp him out like an old cockroach!"

"But - but you said - " *I shall not force you, Harry*. Voldemort's words echoed in his head, and Harry felt the air of the chilly bedroom closing in on him, raising goosebumps across his naked skin. His mouth was very dry, and he withdrew his hand from where it lay frozen upon Voldemort's hairless chest so quickly that it might have burned him.

"Was that your plan all along then?" said Harry angrily. "To lure me away so that you could lock me up again? I - I should have expected it." His voice shook with panic and betrayal. Harry tried desperately to calm himself down, to count to ten, to do anything he could to take control of the situation - but it was to no avail; his fear was instead transforming rapidly into anger, as it often seemed to in such circumstances, and there was nothing to be done for it. "Well, you can't keep me here!" Furiously, Harry shoved himself off of the bed, searching frantically for his knickers on the carpet.

Voldemort snatched his wand from the table beside the bed, robing his naked body with a simple flick of his wrist. "*I do not break my word*," he hissed icily. His words possessed an eerie quietude, steeped in soft menace. He had imagined Potter would want to remain with him forever. How could he wish to return to his foolish, ignorant friends when Lord Voldemort offered him such pleasure? And it struck him with terrifying force that Potter was not an animal like Nagini. Potter was human. Eager to desert him. Weak - his young mind wracked by guilt. The stench of it disgusted the Dark Lord. He felt exposed and furious: helpless as the exquisite moments of their happiness unravelled.

Voldemort's words should have abated his anger, but Harry only seemed to grow more furious. There was something exceedingly unjust about the tightly controlled rage checked on Voldemort's face

and the infuriating way he needed only to wave his wand to clothe himself when Harry was still scrabbling wildly along the floor for his damn knickers. He had never felt so vulnerable.

"Then what gives you the right to be angry?" Harry exclaimed, finally procuring his bright orange pants from underneath the bed. He pulled them on hastily, eager to stand on at least some level ground with the Dark Lord, before glaring fiercely from across the room. "I thought that you - that we were - " He faltered, shame colouring his cheeks. "I thought that it was nice." Harry swallowed, fingers curling into fists as fury and confusion warred for control of his actions. He did not look up again as he spoke; his next words were very quiet. "I don't understand what you want from me."

"Is it not clear enough?" Lord Voldemort glared across at the dishevelled, furious boy, his crimson eyes blazing. "You are regretting ever accepting my invitation! I can sense that your mind is soiled by guilt. Yet what do you imagine the Headmaster can offer you that Lord Voldemort cannot? *I*, Lord Voldemort who has performed magic that Dumbledore himself never dreamed of? He gives you little but sententious half-truths and obfuscation, while I can show you things you can gain from no other wizard! I have seen your dreams - they are *mine*! Why return? Will you tell your friends of our tryst, Harry? What you allowed *Lord Voldemort* to do to you? The wizard who killed the bloodtraitor's uncles and the Mudblood's father? Their devotion is nothing more than ignorance! *You are a fool if you think they will not abandon you, as all abandon loyalty when-*" Voldemort bit down on his tongue. He had said too much. Beset with rage at both himself and Potter, Voldemort was appalled at having given a child the opportunity to torture him so.

"THEY WOULD NOT!" bellowed Potter. The boy's body was trembling with rage. "They're my *friends* - they would never - you don't know *anything about them*! And you don't know anything about me either! This isn't about Dumbledore! This isn't about - about gaining *magic*! This is about - it's about - " Potter gestured wildly between them, face twisting up with desperation. "It's about *you*. And I - I *hate* you! You've completely ruined my life - you can never understand what I - how much I've -"

Potter drew in a deep breath. "But... but I'm not going to abandon you, either. You're more than a killer. You laugh, and you kiss brilliantly, and sometimes you - you even smile at me. You may think that that's all you are... but I - I know better."

"You know *nothing* of ruination." Voldemort whispered. "You are here, are you not? Whole, your powers intact, with friends whom you insist are loyal to you. To ruin something is to achieve its total destruction. I know what it is grow up without one's parents and - unpleasant though it may be - it is not ruination. You may speak to me of *ruin*, Harry Potter, when you have lost everything and all your meagre strength is devoted to existing in agony, moment by moment - year after year - as hope vanishes and your mind slowly unravels into madness. Until that day, *do not presume* to give Lord Voldemort lessons in hatred or suffering. For I have *hated* you, do not doubt it. Rail and rage at Professor Dumbledore all you please, but do not expect *me* to be sympathetic to your childish pronouncements."

"I have had many wizards and witches - usually, it must be said, in the moments before their deaths - see fit to tell me what they believe I am. Yet what do they know of me? What do *you* know of me, Harry?" Lord Voldemort's yew wand slashed the air and Potter's clothes abruptly returned to the boy's body. "Come," the Dark Lord gestured impatiently as he stalked toward the door. "I dare say you are anxious to discover whether or not it is indeed *like that* with everyone."

Harry listened to Voldemort's lengthy harangue with increasing indignation, and was very nearly in danger of shouting out again when the slash of Voldemort's wand and final words silenced him like a blow to the gut. It took him a few moments to even remember what Voldemort was referring to, and when Harry connected it to his own words - an innocent, happy question carelessly posed in the wake of their pleasure - he could only stand there, stunned and extremely hurt.

"I didn't mean it that way." Harry's voice was transformed, soft and very small. "It could never be the same with anyone else." The boy's chest ached horribly as he followed Voldemort to the door, wondering how this all could have gone so terrible so very quickly. He was suddenly extremely exhausted; Harry could never remember feeling so many things in the space of a single day.

Then stay, Harry, stay with me... But Voldemort did not speak as he led Potter down the stairs. Pride held the words back. Auror Savage with his purple cloak, green scarf, and mittens rippled smoothly into existence, masking Lord Voldemort with dull blue eyes and commonplace, human features. His strides halted for a moment in the doorway. He could take Potter now. It would be easy. And the boy would come to see the merit in such a thing. It would not be like last

time, *it would be* –

Voldemort took in the miserable expression on Potter's face. His vengeful magic buzzing under his fingers, the Dark Lord turned on his heel in disgust and walked out into the snow before he did something drastic.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry followed Voldemort out into the icy weather. He felt like something needed to be said, but he didn't know what could fill the awful silence between them. So he only stared quietly at his feet as the Dark Lord grasped his shoulder, eyes fluttering shut as he prepared himself for what was coming next. The unpleasant sensation of Apparition compressed the world into the steady pressure against his arm, Voldemort's elegant, wonderful, terrible fingers anchoring him with their magic - and then the world remade itself into the road just outside of Hogsmeade, the wind chillier than ever, and the unhappy sounds of an argument drifting up the lane.

The shrill voices of two girls rang out, carried on the wind, but Harry was so preoccupied with his unhappiness that he did not even bother to see who was bickering as Voldemort's fingers leg go and something hollowed painfully inside him. He did not pay the argument a thought until he heard the screams and looked up.

Katie Bell was stretched out in the air like a banner, eyes wide open and full of dread. Her screams pierced the wintery air, carrying over the howling wind. Harry did not think twice about what he did next. All thoughts of Voldemort left his mind as he flew forward, grabbing one of Katie's legs as her crying friend tugged at the other. There was more yelling from behind them, and then - thank god - Hermione and Ron were beside him, attempting to help pull her down as well. Their classmate came crashing to the ground not a moment later, screaming and writhing, nearly toppling Ron over in the process.

"Harry!" Hermione cried as they knelt beside the flailing girl, "Harry, where have you *been*? What's happened?! Is she alright?! -"

"I don't know!" Harry yelled with frustration. Katie did not seem to recognize any of them; if anything, she only seemed to be getting worse.

"Stand aside! Out of my way, you foolish children!" Voldemort commanded, scattering panicked Gryffindors. His sharp eyes spied the

sodden brown-paper package on the ground, which had split open to reveal a greenish glitter. Immediately, the cherry wood wand flashed and a protective ring of Voldemort's powerful magic encircled the parcel, melting the surrounding snow.

For Voldemort recognised the ornate silver and opal necklace within the paper wrappings as a cursed item he himself had acquired for Mr Burke from old Arcturus Black, along with several other Dark artefacts. Mr Burke had not been enthused about the opal necklace and dressed the thing up with a cheap story about Muggle killings. But Voldemort had been fascinated by the cursed jewels, whose Dark enchantment was rooted in Babylonian death magic.

Inwardly amused by the irony of his predicament, the Dark Lord bent over the thrashing, shrieking girl. He crouched beside her in the snow, aware of the eyes fixed expectantly on his back. The curse laid upon her would not permit ordinary spells to affect her condition without the greatest difficulty, but it did not prevent yet another curse from striking her. Wordlessly, one hand gently cupping the side of the girl's face, Voldemort cast the Imperius Curse. "You must be still now," he whispered softly to her as the girl lay limply in the snow, staring blankly up at the dark, grey sky.

How fortunate this silly girl was that she had only touched the necklace for a moment, and that she had happened fall victim to such a curse right in front of the greatest living expert on Dark magic, at a time when he was – unfortunately – obliged to do something about it.

Lord Voldemort pulled off one of his gloves and laid his cold fingers against the girl's forehead, closing his eyes and feeling for the fatal threads of the curse. Its barbed, Dark energy lay across her aura, deadly in its intricacy; elegant, vicious spellwork Voldemort remembered admiring when he first had the opportunity to examine the object.

But, however potent the enchantment, it was still based on the original Assyro-Babylonian death curse and whatever modifications had been made over the centuries would still crumble before the ancient counter-spell. Golden light poured from Savage's wand, enveloping the girl, drawing her back up into the air. There were cries from the other students, but Voldemort paid them no attention. Ancient words, long forgotten by most wizards, spilled easily from the Dark Lord's tongue. Old, powerful magic surrounded Voldemort, whose concentration was absolute. One wrong inflection and the girl was dead.

Magic swirled in the air, and Voldemort used the Auror's wand to lift Katie, who was no longer screaming, off the ground once more. Ron gave a yell of protest, but Harry threw out an arm and held him back, his eyes never once leaving the Dark Lord.

"Harry," Hermione hissed in his ear, grabbing his arm, "are you quite sure that we can trust him? You vanished for such a long time - we were afraid that he'd abducted you!"

Harry watched as Lord Voldemort wove the intricate golden threads of magic around their classmate's limp body, saving her - despite everything that had just transpired between the two of them. Despite the fact that Harry had yelled and raged and chosen to leave. "Yeah," said Harry, his voice barely audible over the wind. Something twisted painfully inside of his chest. "We can trust him."

The light surrounding Katie's body grew brighter, and then it blinked out with a final wave of the Auror's wand. She fell gracefully into the arms of Lord Voldemort, who held her like she weighed little more than a small child, like he saved Gryffindors from terrible magical afflictions every day of his life. Leanne and Hermione immediately flew to her side as the girl slowly blinked her eyes open, looking around herself with an expression of dazed shock. Ron remained beside Harry, his jaw dangling open with awe.

"Bloody hell," Ron said, finally tearing his eyes away from the Auror to look at his friend. "Did you see that, Harry? He's *brilliant!*"

Harry rather felt like he wanted to kick something. If only Ron had known what Voldemort had just been saying about him and Hermione. Anger bubbled up in Harry's chest, but it was dulled by his exhaustion as well as his overflowing gratitude that Voldemort really had just rescued their friend, a student, a Gryffindor. It shouldn't be possible to feel so many different things for one person at one time.

Voldemort gently handed the dazed girl off to the Mudblood, soundlessly dispelling his Imperius Curse. He fixed the students with an authoritative glare. A small gesture from the Dark Lord and the parcel wrapped itself back around the opal necklace, which flew obediently into Voldemort's hand. "Now, would one of you like to tell me how two children managed to get hold of a necklace brimming with ancient Babylonian death magic?"

"Uh..." the other girl, Leanne, wilted under his stare, and continued to

sob. Voldemort tried very hard to look patient for the sake of appearances.

"But that kind of magic has been illegal for centuries!" the Mudblood gasped, patting the victim's shoulder, suddenly looking at Voldemort with new-found admiration.

"He's an Auror - of course he knows about that kind of magic," Potter said hastily, clearly eager to turn his friend's scrutiny away from how intimate their escort was with obscure Dark artefacts. "I've seen that necklace in Borgin and Burke's," Potter added in a low voice, finally turning his gaze to meet Voldemort's. "The label said it was cursed." *I wonder, Potter, what you were doing perusing cursed jewellery in Borgin and Burkes?*

"She said that it was a d-delivery for someone in Hogwarts," Leanne hiccupped pathetically, wiping at her eyes. "She - she wouldn't tell me who gave it to her."

"Funny," Potter said softly to the Weasley boy when the foolish girl burst into tears again. "I could have sworn we saw someone in Borgin and Burkes recently that has been acting very suspicious." He gave his friend a darkly significant look, but the bloodtraitor was hardly paying attention; he was gaping with admiration at Lord Voldemort. As well he should.

"Oh, lay off that already, will you?" the boy scowled at Potter before turning his attention back to the Dark Lord. "That was brilliant! Was that some sort of counter-curse? You know, my brother Bill is a curse-breaker for Gringotts." He grinned, obviously expecting Voldemort to be impressed with this information.

Highly amused by the enthusiasm of Potter's red-headed companion - and the obvious annoyance shining out of those green eyes - Voldemort treated them both to a dry smile. "Indeed? A noble profession. But we digress." He turned to the girl shaking in the arms of her friends. "What is your name?"

"K-Katie, sir... Katie Bell..."

Voldemort's fingers found her chin, lifting her eyes to meet his own. "Now, Katie, it is crucial that you tell me who gave you this necklace."

"T-the l-l-last thing I remember was walking into the ladies' at the Three Broomsticks..." The witless girl shook her head, obviously frightened. "I don't know... I... I was supposed to give it to someone. It

was going to b-be a surprise..."

"And who was to be the recipient of this... surprise?" Someone had obviously put her under the Imperius Curse before him. But the curse had not been cast by an expert in the Dark Arts. It took only the simplest of Legilimentic nudges in order to dislodge her misplaced memory -

"Dumbledore!" The girl cried, shocked by the swiftness of her abrupt recollection. "Sir, they wanted me to give it to Dumbledore!" And Voldemort had to keep himself from laughing at Draco Malfoy's pathetic, puerile efforts.

Harry forced himself to bite his tongue against a sudden and inexplicable surge of irritation when Voldemort lifted the girl's chin so casually, the same way he often touched Harry's when the boy found himself upset or angry. He then quickly bit down on a very different emotion when he thought about what else those fingers had been doing only an hour ago. Why did Voldemort have to touch her at all, anyway? She was clearly a lot better now, wasn't she?

Any ill-will for Katie Bell, however, was quickly replaced with astonishment when she burst out with the necklace's intended target. "Someone's trying to curse Dumbledore?" Hermione whispered, looking just as surprised and anxious as Harry felt. Surprised, and anxious, and... and...

Amused?

Harry's gaze swivelled to the Dark Lord, eyes narrowing with confusion. Voldemort did not look as though he were ready to burst into laughter - the face of the Auror was as stoic as ever - but there it was in Harry's scar, the burning urge to laugh that was bubbling over onto his side of their connection. Harry's stomach turned. Voldemort clearly knew a lot more about this necklace than he was letting on.

"Someone must go warn him at once!" said Hermione, her eyes wide. She turned to the Auror. "Sir, if that was intended for Professor Dumbledore, this means that he's in great danger!"

"Headmaster Dumbledore is not at Hogwarts," Voldemort said softly. "Auror Tonks informed me this morning. I was informed that we were to take all security concerns to the Deputy Headmistress or Professor Snape." He paused for a moment before continuing, as though musing to himself. "If Mr Potter is correct about this item being on sale until

recently... then I believe this to be the work of an amateur. Whoever cast the Imperius Curse on Miss Bell in the Three Broomsticks was not well versed in Dark magic. Besides which, many experienced sorcerers would balk at dealing with such an archaic and powerful enchantment as the one on this necklace.

"I suspect that whoever the culprit was, he or she did not really understand the nature of the curse, only that it was fatal. I sincerely doubt a wizard such as Professor Dumbledore, even if he *were* here, would truly be in danger from such a foolish, haphazard plan, which was more dangerous to the perpetrator and his unwitting accomplices than the Headmaster." He shook his head and gave a melancholy sigh that set Harry's teeth on edge. "Possibly some young idiot trying to *impress* He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Yeah, really, Hermione," scoffed Ron, who was hanging on Voldemort's every word. "This whole operation *reeks* of an amateur. No danger here." This earned Ron a very dark look of exasperation from Hermione - not that Ron noticed, as he was too busy grinning up at Voldemort, awaiting further words of wisdom from the great and mighty Auror. Harry, who was not eager to deal with their bickering on top of everything else, quickly changed the subject.

"But what if this person endangers other students?" Harry looked at Voldemort with his eyebrows raised. "We might not be so lucky to have such an expert with us next time." He gave the Dark Lord a wary look; his reassurances had only served to confirm Harry's suspicions about one Draco Malfoy, and judging from his reaction, Voldemort knew exactly why a cursed necklace had ended up in a student's hands at Hogsmeade. His stomach lurched as he considered just how convenient their return had been - a few more minutes, and Katie might have died. *How could Voldemort find this funny?*

"You are right, of course." Voldemort spared Harry a brief nod. "I shall escort you all back to Hogwarts and then return with more aurors to see if we can find any evidence at the Three Broomsticks of who did this. Are you well enough to walk, Miss Bell?"

"Y-yes," stammered Katie, the colour slowly returning to her face. Leanne and Hermione carefully helped her to her feet, holding her on either side. Ron, meanwhile, looked visibly deflated by this turn of events, and Harry was not only slightly annoyed by the Dark Lord's lack of attention. As the group of students began to proceed down the lane, Harry turned to Voldemort and touched his arm.

"Let me come with you," said Harry with quiet urgency. "I can help - perhaps he's still hanging around Hogsmeade. By the time we get all the way back to the castle, he'll be gone for sure." The prospect of catching Malfoy in the act - of proving to Hermione and Ron that his suspicions weren't based purely in paranoia - was simply too good for Harry to pass up.

"I rather doubt it," the Dark Lord replied just as softly, the bitter wind snatching their low conversation from the ears of the others. "Whoever did this will likely have bolted as soon as they cast the Imperius Curse on Madam Rosmerta. There you are, I have given you a clue - which is rather more than you deserve." Voldemort shook his head, glaring at Harry, false blue eyes flashing red as they reached the gates of Hogwarts. High, cold words struck Harry's mind, as cruel as the freezing sleet: *I am no petty Auror, Harry. I have no intention of investigating this mystery. On the contrary, I shall revive Auror Savage, bequeath him a few memories of this encounter, and take my leave.*

"I am sorry, Mr Potter," Voldemort began in a louder voice as Harry glared back at him. "But I am afraid I really cannot in all *conscience* allow you to accompany me. It is my duty to keep you safe. If you wish to be of service, go and find one of your professors. I assure you, the Ministry will be able to handle the investigation from here." Voldemort nodded to Harry, and then he vanished into the snow with a loud crack before Harry could say anything more.

"Wow," breathed Ron, who was still staring at the spot where Voldemort had just been standing. "He's really something else, isn't he? *I'm* going to be an Auror just like that someday."

"Oh, get over yourself, Ron," said Hermione, who was clearly still very angry. "You'd better start spending a lot more time in the library if you want to even have a chance at working for the Ministry."

The two of them argued all the way back to the castle about whether the merits of the school library had any effect on one's chances at a future as an Auror. But Harry hung behind, feeling angry and miserable. They had had such a nice time - and then Harry had gone and ruined it. *Ruined*. Because that's what he'd done. Complete and utter destruction. Harry buried his face in his hands as he followed his friends into the castle. "I'll bet you Auror Savage didn't get so great because of a bunch of smelly books," Ron was saying loudly, and Harry fought down an urge to punch him. It was going to be a long, lonely night.

Part VI

The evening was filled with the excited chatter and speculations of Harry's housemates. Leanne took Katie to the dormitory straightaway, but Harry, Ron and Hermione remained after dinner in the common room with the other Gryffindor sixth years – all of whom were eager to hear about the excitement of the day and Auror Savage's heroics, which were made even more extravagant by Ron's blind veneration of him. By Ron's umpteenth dramatic retelling for those not fortunate enough to have witnessed the thrilling episode, Katie had been attacked by a great shadowy monster that Auror Savage fought off himself in a spectacular demonstration of duelling.

Harry, for his part, remained silently in an armchair, not speaking very much to anyone. He was lucky to avoid too many prying questions concerning his mysterious disappearance - he told his friends that his escort had spied something suspicious in a back alley and they had gone to investigate, an explanation that Ron accepted readily and that Hermione did not press him on. But even though everyone else was much more interested in the events following Harry's hour of separation rather than his disappearance itself, Harry found that all he could think about was the time he had spent with Voldemort that day. Now that the excitement of Katie's rescue had passed - as well as the lost opportunity for Harry to prove his suspicions about Malfoy's ill intentions - his mind was completely stuck on the fleeting happiness they had found and how quickly Harry had gone and ruined it.

Harry buried his face in his hands as Ron launched into yet another recounting of how gallant Auror Savage was, how brave and generous, and do you think he might have been in Gryffindor? Even Harry's irritation at Malfoy's plan, of which Voldemort seemed to have intimate knowledge, could not make Harry feel any better. How could he begrudge the Dark Lord for the cursed necklace when Voldemort had acted so quickly to save its victim?

There had clearly been a misunderstanding. After replaying the events of the afternoon in his head for the dozenth time - taking care not to linger on certain parts, lest he start blushing right there in the common room - Harry had come to the conclusion that, somewhere along the way, there had been a vast miscommunication between them. For Merlin's sake, Voldemort had honestly thought Harry wanted to do *that* with other people! The very notion made Harry feel

extremely uncomfortable. He'd never even considered touching another person that way before Voldemort had put the idea in his head - it was unnatural, awkward, embarrassing - but what they had done today had been the most natural thing in the world. Harry simply could not imagine being so intimate with another human being, especially when the connection between their souls was already about as intimate as two people can get.

But instead of expressing all of this, Harry had thrown a tantrum. He hadn't bothered to understand why Voldemort had become so incensed; he had only assumed the worst of this person who had spent the day treating him with nothing but kindness. Harry had seen an entirely different side of the Dark Lord - he had seen a glimpse of hope for the future, one that didn't involve Harry's inevitable death or a war that would ravage all of wizarding Europe - and it had just as quickly been snatched away by his childish behaviour. Voldemort had barely even said goodbye to him. It had not been until the Dark Lord had Disapparated and Ron had begun to sing his praises that Harry had been able to think about the situation without being blinded by the fog of his frustration - and by then, it had been too late.

"Isn't that right, Harry?"

The beleaguered Gryffindor looked up at his name. Ron, Ginny and Dean were all staring at him expectantly, and even an irritated Hermione, exhausted by Ron's wild exaggerations, glanced up from her schoolwork to observe.

"Yeah," Harry answered distractedly. "Yeah, he was brilliant."

This seemed to satisfy Ron, who immediately took centre stage once more. Hermione, however, was still looking at him thoughtfully, and Harry decided that it would be a good idea to make an escape while they were all still preoccupied.

"I'm going to head up for the night," Harry mumbled as he rose to his feet. Hardly anyone noticed his departure but for a few half-hearted waves, but Harry could feel the weight of Hermione's gaze on his back as he climbed the stairs. He knew that she wanted to talk with him more seriously about what had taken place today, but that particular conversation, prepared as he was for it, would have to wait. Harry had something much more important to salvage, and he had a feeling that Hermione would wait for it a lot more patiently than Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord had always found it hard to be idle. That evening, he

busied himself pouring over ancient texts – less to renew his interest in such magic and more to occupy his thoughts with the linguistic exercise such antiquated glyphs presented. He felt oppressed by Potter, as though the boy had ripped a layer of skin from his body, leaving him raw and smarting where they had touched. He could not sit still without effort; he needed to move, to pace, to *kill*.

This lack of control infuriated Lord Voldemort, who ruthlessly overrode such desires and forced himself to concentrate on descriptions of complex Akkadian rituals. The Dark Lord would not allow Potter to conquer his reason, to stir his thoughts so.

But the boy remained: ancient scripts curling, slurring as the hours drifted by, into Potter's defiant features; ink flowing into dishevelled black hair until Voldemort clawed furiously at the pages of his rare books – sharp nails tearing fragile parchment. *Weakness*, Potter's soft lips whispered from the darkness of Voldemort's mind. *How foolish you were – you – who know how unwise it is ever to trust. You did not wish to read my thoughts because you were afraid...*

"I FEAR NOTHING!" Lord Voldemort screeched into the abyss.

But there was no one there.

He held his wand before him, searching for the invisible voices which hissed insults from beyond; his night-hunting, scarlet eyes flaming in the dark and his slit nostrils flaring. Blue wandlight shivered across wet, black rocks and the rancid air was thick with salt. Yet the lake was nowhere to be found, hidden within a subterranean labyrinth of dark, damp stone.

"Come out..." Voldemort called softly toward the insolent, numinous sounds echoing from the shadows. "Come... and Lord Voldemort shall grant you the mercy of swift deaths..." But the unseen, jeering creatures continued to move about him – just ahead, just behind – and the Dark Lord screamed in fury, a jet of brilliant green light splitting the darkness of the cave like lightning.

The darkness here was absolute. Harry might have believed he was still sprawled out in his four-poster were it not for the heavy scent of the sea filling his nostrils, the nip in the air that raised goosebumps along his bare legs. *Just a dream*, Harry thought to himself; *I am in control*. He closed his eyes as *Dream Warrior* had instructed. When he opened them again, his shorts had been replaced by trousers, and Harry began to walk.

This was not a pleasant dream. Harry could tell immediately from the undercurrent of distress churning beneath the stone which grew more slippery the deeper he went into the cave. It frightened him. For a moment, Harry considered calling the image of his wand from his memory - his real wand, not that silly little thing that Filch had given him - but decided hesitantly that a weapon probably wouldn't make the best olive branch in this situation. He would confront the Dark Lord without his wand - a sign of his regret for what had happened.

He ignored the niggling voice that reminded him that, if Lord Voldemort truly wished to punish him, Harry might as well snap his wand in two and throw it clattering to the cave's floor for all the good it would do him.

A sudden shriek, loud and furious, echoed from the depths of the cave, and Harry nearly slipped on the wet floor in his surprise. The black stone walls were briefly illuminated by a sudden burst of green light - and for a moment he needed to stop to calm his racing heart.

Could Voldemort kill him here? *Dream Warrior* had emphasized the importance of distinguishing between dreams and reality - subconscious and conscious behaviour, the power of one to overtake the other inside one's mind and the opposite in the world of the waking. Dreams were a very useful source of information for the skilled Legilimens, but they did not and could not affect reality. It was imperative not to forget this - a whole chapter was spent reiterating the import of this idea.

But the author had never encountered a scenario such as this. Harry held a piece of Lord Voldemort's soul. Had this thrown everything else off-kilter? He remembered the golden snake that had followed him from the island in the Pacific to his bed in Gryffindor Tower, and his stomach lurched violently. He saw Ron pulling back his bed curtain the next morning to see his best friend, green eyes glazed over with the classic Avada Kedavra stare, the life drained from his unmoving body in his sleep.

And then Harry shook himself. This was how he had gotten himself into this situation in the first place - assuming the worst of a person who had tried so very hard to show Harry kindness. Swallowing, the boy forced himself to continue onward, following the bend in the cave that had been revealed in the brief flash of light, bare feet slapping on the cold stone.

He emerged into open darkness. A breeze drifted across the wide

space and lifted Harry's fringe from his forehead, but there was no other movement. The boy stood stock still, heart pounding furiously, squinting into the dark for any sign of life. "Voldemort?" he called, his voice much steadier than he felt. The name echoed across the huge, empty space gutted out of the mountain. He struggled to fight his rising fear with memories of Voldemort's hands, so tender and wonderful, touching his naked body - hands that would not hurt him. "It's me. It's Harry."

His chosen name called back from the darkness. A taunt: one of them using Potter's voice - Potter's *lips* - to torment him. The yew wand wavered. *It's me. It's Harry.*

Harry, Harry, Harry... The rocks whispered the word, twisting and repeating until it grew, crawling into Voldemort's mind in a vicious cacophony. The Dark Lord hissed, long fingers tightening around his wand. They would not trick Lord Voldemort. His curses illuminated the cavern in a storm of verdant light, but still the words would not stop. They pressed down upon him, laughing at his spells.

Then silence. And the stillness was somehow infinitely more terrible than the words. A viscid void which swallowed his flesh layer by layer. Voldemort screamed as blood spilled from his hands; too slick to grip his wand. He fell, scrabbling for his wand with fingers of sheer bone in the ever-increasing pool of blood which began to fill the cavern like the rush of the sea. But suddenly he could not smell the stench of his own blood, or feel the shredding agony of the threshing of his body. And then Voldemort truly screamed, a soundless shriek of thwarted terror, as he saw his mutilated corpse float upon the tide of his own blood.

There was nothing Harry could do. He could only stand, helpless and blind, as Voldemort's horrified screams filled the cave, terrifying flashes of magic throwing light on his thrashing body, flesh red and dripping no matter the colour of the spell. There was the sound of the yew wand bouncing against the rocks, and then - Harry's hand flew to his mouth in horror - the unmistakable smell of *blood* overtook the sea salt in the air.

"Voldemort!" cried Harry, but the Dark Lord's screams had fallen silent with the darkness. There was no sound but Harry's heavy breathing, the rush of blood loud in his ears, his heart thudding furiously in his chest. *Just a dream, just a dream* - he managed to swallow his panic

long enough to imagine his wand, so wonderfully familiar between his fingers, and, with only the briefest moment of hesitation, cast a brilliant *Lumos* to light up the cavern.

Lord Voldemort's body floated, motionless, upon a small lake of blood.

Harry couldn't remember how to breathe, how to think. The only thought that occupied his mind was a golden snake that had slithered underneath his pillow in the dormitory, and how very *dead* Voldemort looked right now. And then Harry was running to the foul pool of Voldemort's blood, calling the Dark Lord's name over and over again, and terrible emotion welling up in his chest. His fingers were shaking as he attempted to summon the body, the result being that Voldemort was only pulled a few feet toward him, but it was enough - Harry ran in knee-deep, fingers grasping slimy, flayed flesh, dragging Voldemort to the shore of his own gore.

"No, no, no, *no* -" Harry threw his lit wand to the ground and knelt down, pulling the Dark Lord half into his lap on the dry stone. Voldemort's eyes were wide and unseeing, his body almost completely stripped of his skin - skin that had been so smooth and cool and wonderful to the touch, Harry remembered - so that muscle and bone peeked out grotesquely in places. Harry knew that this was his enemy - the one he was destined to kill - but all he could feel was the cruel, aching pain of loss, of denial, the same pain with which he struggled whenever he thought of Sirius' body as it fell through the shimmering veil. "No, no, *please*."

Harry's fingers turned the Dark Lord's face upward to look him in the eye. Emotion rose in his throat. He would never get to apologize. He would never get to see that thin, wonderful smile twisting Voldemort's mouth, to feel the brilliant pulse of their connection rushing through his veins. There had been hope and beauty and happiness, not only for Voldemort, but for Harry as well. "No, Voldemort, please," he whispered brokenly, cupping his shredded face, indifferent to the blood that smeared across his fingers. "It's only a dream, it's only a dream. I'm here, I'm sorry; I'm sorry, *please*..."

Voldemort watched with astonishment as Harry Potter clutched at what remained of his body. It awoke the Dark Lord from the fear of his dream. Feeling bled out of Potter just as blood still seeped from Voldemort's dead flesh. He remembered those emotions: they had burned and ravaged his spirit as he had fought for control of Potter's mind at the Ministry. Yet now the wash of the boy's feelings comforted

him; this was truly Potter - not some cruel, wishful illusion - and though the child's distress mingled with his own emotions, it did not hurt him as it had before.

Harry... Voldemort called, reaching out with hands of shadowy vapour. The grief on Potter's face was such that he forgot his anger, touched by the sentiment etched into the boy's features. Potter was here. Potter would perform the magic he could not and restore him to a body. Potter would not... would not abandon him. Harry, I shall never die. You know, perhaps more than any other, the steps I took to guard myself against mortal death...

Harry... His name had never sounded so sweet. The Gryffindor looked up with huge, shining eyes, searching for the speaker - for the voice came not from the unmoving body in Harry's arms, but from inside of him, around him. From their connection, which had not been severed, which meant that Voldemort was still -

A small, terrified sound escaped Harry's lips when he saw the shadow coming for him. It was a collection of swarming darkness, powerful magic that seemed to repel the air around it with its gloom. And yet it was Voldemort's voice that whispered from within the shade, Voldemort's aura that reached out to him even as it was bereft of its body. There was nothing to fear here. Voldemort would not hurt him.

A fierce wave of relief swept over Harry, a weight lifting from his shoulders. His embarrassment at being caught nearly weeping over Voldemort's corpse was nothing in comparison to the happiness he felt; never had he been so glad to be wrong about something. "You're all right," said Harry, voice hoarse. "I was - you frightened me. You looked - hurt, and you weren't breathing -" His eyes darted briefly from the heavy body on his lap to the shadow that rippled on the air. "Are you in pain?"

I have learned that there is always pain. The mist of Voldemort's spirit whispered around Harry. But I now know that this is but a dream and thus am not in the agonies I might have been had you not come. This nightmare is not... uncommon for me, Harry. I dread a return to this existence. Yet you came for me... Cold darkness swirled, hovering against Harry's cheek. Voldemort chuckled softly: a mirthless, insane sound.

Yet would you come for me if my body died, Harry? Would you seek me out - come to my aid as none of those who called themselves my servants

did when Lord Voldemort had need of them? Ah... I think not.

"I would so," said Harry fiercely, hardly sparing a moment to think over the question. Voldemort's doubt stung. "I'm not your servant. Your servants are afraid of you - of course they'd be happy if you disappeared. I'm your friend." He shivered a little where Voldemort's shade sent a dark tremor coursing through his cheek. "And friends don't let friends suffer."

Your devotion is touching, but you have other friends, Harry. How happy they would be at the news of my demise. You were a mewling infant that night. But I saw it through the veil of my agonies as I fled, powerless as the weakest creature alive. Jubilation. Fireworks. Wizards and witches dancing, embracing one another in the streets. Would you be Lord Voldemort's friend then, my treasure? Could you slip away to betray your companions' celebration? Betray the purpose for which they say you are destined and all of the deluded fools relying on you to save them from the Dark Lord? You cannot lie to me, Harry, as easily as you seem able to deceive yourself.

Harry faltered, chest tightening. He hadn't thought past the horror of seeing Voldemort's body, lifeless and drained of all its grace and elegance - a horror he had just experienced only moments ago. He was silent for a very long time.

"I wish there was another way," Harry mumbled at last, looking down at his lap into the dead, glassy eyes of Lord Voldemort's corpse. His stomach turned, and he forced himself to look away. "I don't want you to die. I don't want anyone else to die. I couldn't just sit back while everyone else celebrated. There's got to be another way."

Understand, Harry, I want to kill your friends. I desire to see their bodies at my feet. I should very much like to see you weep for them; watch it slowly dawn upon you that I, Lord Voldemort, am your entire existence. I demand absolute loyalty from my servants - yet you, a boy I must trust with my very soul, are not even bound to my service. So what am I to do? I must charm you. But I am tired, dear Harry. My patience is not what it once was. And I cannot end your companions' lives because then you will remember what I am and I need you, Harry. I need you to count to ten for me. I need you at my side, to awaken entangled in your skin. It is necessary that I possess you utterly.

"You're asking so much of me." Harry's head was still bent over Voldemort's body, but his gaze flickered up to the seething shadow that floated on the air, above him, around him. "And in return, I have

to watch you kill everyone I love, destroy everything that I care about. I didn't want to leave. That's what I came here to say - that I'm sorry. But I can't stay when staying means I'm abandoning my friends. They're going to fight you, every last one of them... and I can't just stand by and watch while you slaughter them."

I will rule, Harry. By late next year I shall be in complete control of Wizarding Britain. And those who dare resist me will be slaughtered, yes, you are quite right. But I am not a monster. If you wish me to spare the lives of your friends, my treasure, then I may consider doing so... The ghost paused for a moment, letting the offer sink in. I was made to rule our world, Harry! Can you not see it?

Harry blinked up at the Dark Lord's spectre in confusion. "I've... never really thought about it, I suppose." In truth, he'd never thought much about the future past the terrifying moment where he was supposed to vanquish Voldemort once and for all. He'd certainly never considered the possibility of Voldemort winning. The images that came to mind were not pleasant - burning villages, dead bodies, Dark Marks painting the sky.

Harry cringed and shook his head. "But you hate people. Why would you want to deal with them all the time?"

Hatred is too strong a word for what I feel for, as you say, most people. Indeed, I hardly think of them at all - it would dignify them undeservedly. But my plans are rather more complicated than that, Harry. I have simple tastes. I do not require a throne. I shall keep the Ministry and its Minister. Even the Wizengamot. But everyone shall know that I rule. Why should I sully myself with bureaucratic drivel when there are scores of ambitious wizards - who foolishly believe the path to power lies through the Ministry - ready to serve me?

"Simple," Harry repeated, and he very nearly snorted. On an impulse, he raised his hand, still streaked with blood, and dipped his fingers into the cloud of swirling shadow. A dark quiver ran down his arm, the connection between their souls somehow more powerful without the barrier of skin in between. "This is simple," he whispered. "Our dreams are simple, our *connection* is simple... ruling the world isn't simple." He took a deep breath, not withdrawing his hand from where it was anchored in the gloom of Voldemort's spirit. "Let's go somewhere else, please, before we wake up. I hate seeing you like this." He wasn't sure if he was referring to the mangled body in his arms or the broken phantom of Voldemort's soul.

Of course, Voldemort let the cold words drip into Potter's mind. If you had waited for an invitation, I might have had somewhere more pleasant prepared for you... His anger was mollified by the hand thrust into the mist of his spirit. White fingers coalesced, curling around Potter's wrist and pulling him from the cavern, parting beads of liquid darkness into spice-laden air and soft, tasselled cushions.

Blue smoke drifted across a jewel-coloured ceiling. A haven Voldemort had discovered long ago in Egypt. The Dark Lord reclined, taking a delicate puff from the ornate hookah at his elbow, exhaling breath the colour of lapis lazuli through anguine nostrils. Hieroglyphic texts were spread out around Voldemort's couch, which he shifted into a neat pile with his wand in order to make room for Potter. The old, drug-addled Egyptian wizards who snored on other couches paid them no attention.

"Harry, I speak ten languages and can write in seventeen." Voldemort said matter-of-factly, without a trace of pride. "As a child, I could already consciously perform magic without a wand that most only attain in their second or third year of Hogwarts. At school, I was considered the most brilliant pupil who had ever attended. By the time I left, I was immortal. As an adult, I travelled the world mastering the most advanced magic in existence. I devised a means to fly without the aid of a broom in a month. Do any of these things seem *simple* to you, Harry? I am determined to rule Wizarding Britain precisely because many have said that I, Lord Voldemort, *cannot* do so. I have given you my view of impossibility. Some of the most powerful witches and wizards of our time are arrayed against me. All the better. No one can thrive without challenge."

Voldemort's long, white fingers stroked through Potter's hair. His emaciated, porcelain figure was wrapped in robes of crimson silk - the same shade as the glittering, slit-pupilled eyes which stared dreamily into the distance. "I once read that, when Anaxarchus told Alexander of the infinite number of worlds, he wept and cried: *is it not a matter for tears that, when the number of worlds is infinite, I have not conquered one?*"

There were a good few moments of silence before Potter realized that Voldemort had stopped talking. "Er... yes," he said eventually, with very clearly no idea what the Dark Lord was talking about. "'That's, er, very sad, isn't it?'" The boy had sunk happily into the couch, curling up against the Dark Lord and leaning unconsciously into Voldemort's touch, eyelids drifting half-shut. Potter sighed heavily and leaned into Voldemort's fingers, his gaze drifting across the room and observing

the dark-skinned men sprawled across couches similar to their own. "Where exactly are we, anyway?"

"An island of quiet I once found in the Wizarding district of Cairo," Voldemort explained silkily, offering his Horcrux the hookah. "Shisha, my treasure? The proprietor always insisted his blend contained powdered Runespoor eggs, but I have my doubts..."

The air was heavy with perfume and smoke, not unlike Professor Trelawney's classroom, and Harry found it very difficult to pay attention while Voldemort spoke, the intoxicating scent of incense having its usual effect on Harry's attention span. He accepted the device uncertainly. He'd never seen anything like it before, but it was a beautiful thing - coloured glass, blue smoke wafting out of the end - and Voldemort was giving it to him, so it couldn't be all that bad, right? Imitating the Dark Lord, Harry took a very deep drag - and began to cough violently, clouds of blue bursting from his lips as his lungs convulsed.

It was a few seconds before the coughing subsided. By the time he had finished, Harry was very close to glaring at his companion for suggesting such an unpleasant thing - and then the world shifted in the most wonderful way. A haze of pleasure descended over Harry's mind, dousing any other thoughts with lazy satisfaction. The boy looked about the room as though he were observing it for the first time - the colours were stronger, bolder, blending together and swirling. Harry turned with a grin to Voldemort, whose silky red robes were shimmering along with the rest of the room. A butterfly separated from the gleaming material and landed on Voldemort's face. Harry let out a giggle.

"Oh," said Harry, and he buried his face in the satin of the Dark Lord's soft robes, the hookah forgotten on the couch. "Ohhh, this is very nice." He curled as close as possible to Voldemort's body on the couch. Had they been fighting before? Harry couldn't recall - but it didn't seem to matter now. He knew only that being close to Voldemort was a very wonderful thing, and there was no reason that he shouldn't - not that he could think of, anyway. "Will you keep touching my hair?" Harry mumbled into Voldemort's shoulder, smiling. "I like it when you touch me."

An odd collection of emotions drifted across Voldemort's mind. Potter seemed lazily contented in his embrace, his only thought to have

Voldemort continue to caress him. It reminded the Dark Lord of Nagini by the fireside. His familiar would coil around his chair whispering to him contentedly as Voldemort stroked her green scales possessively. His Horcrux. His Nagini. His sole companion in immortality.

And now he had another. This foolish boy who had shown him what true connection could be. Of course Voldemort would always treasure Nagini, but Potter *spoke* to him with more than animal intelligence. Most of what he said was drivel, but Voldemort had responded to it, telling Potter a few of the many secrets of Lord Voldemort. Personal things he had never discussed with anyone. *Why?* What did it profit him to disclose such knowledge? It troubled the Dark Lord.

But as long, white fingers played languidly with black hairs as irrepresible as the boy to whom they belonged, Voldemort hit upon the answer. He had wanted - the desire hidden for so many years in a ridiculous, dusty corner of his mind - Potter to *understand*. He talked because he imagined his human Horcrux, of all beings, might be able to grasp his great purpose. A foolish notion indeed. Potter's eyes lost focus whenever the Dark Lord spoke for too long or used large words. He was alone. No one could ever comprehend Lord Voldemort.

Even as Voldemort's thoughts hardened with such knowledge, he took pleasure in Potter's abrupt pliability, vaguely considering whether it might be worthwhile to keep the boy drugged in future. Though the connection hummed sensually between them, Voldemort felt very distant from Harry. *Perhaps this is what it is to feel old?* he wondered, exhaling azure smoke, his enigmatic reptilian eyes gazing contemplatively at his Horcrux.

Dumbledore had never believed in Voldemort's desire to teach, but the truth was that the Dark Lord had a keen desire to uproot worthy wizards and witches from their limited ideas and show them true power. Had he not devoted much to the tuition of both Bellatrix and Severus? *Did Harry possess any desire for greatness at all?*

Without the Dark Lord, he would be but a commonplace boy with no real talent but Quidditch. Now Voldemort wanted this ordinary child - *his child* through an accident of fate - to be worthy of the honour circumstance had heaped upon him. The Dark Lord sighed, pressing a melancholy kiss against the nape of Potter's neck. *I have always known myself to be extraordinary and that this boy is simply an accident. I have no equal.* But the thought was not as comforting as it should have been.

Wrapped in an intoxicating haze of blue smoke, it was very difficult for Harry to think past the lovely fingers stroking through his hair. But he could sense that there was something not quite right between them. Harry's lazy fascination with the pattern in the collared swirls of smoke was suddenly tainted; concern rippled through his drug-induced satisfaction. Sitting up slowly, Harry rested his chin on the Dark Lord's shoulder, staring thoughtfully into eyes that matched the colour of the silken robes beneath his fingers. His gaze, so many shades of crimson, was brighter, even more beautiful this way.

"You're unhappy." Harry could see this with perfect clarity - the drug had fine-tuned his awareness of everything in the room, from the silky fabric under his chin to the waves of unsettling darkness emanating from the serpentine man beside him. With a little frown, the boy nuzzled his nose against Voldemort's neck, but the pleasure that gathered with their connection did not dispel the disquiet lingering in the air. "You're unhappy with *me*," he amended sadly after a few long moments. "I can tell." He sighed against the Dark Lord's shoulder, trying not to sulk, but his dejection was somehow intensified by the drug still working through his system and the sum total of everything that had happened that day. "I'll bet you wish Malfoy were your Horcrux instead," he mumbled, bitterly remembering Katie Bell's package and Voldemort's great amusement. Perhaps it had all been a private little joke between them.

"Lucius?" Voldemort raised a hairless brow in cold surprise. "You imagine I would prefer the faithless servant who never searched for me, who lost me the prophecy, and who sacrificed one of my Horcruxes on the altar of his own petty revenge against Arthur Weasley?" The Dark Lord paused, realising that Harry had not meant Lucius. "*Draco* Malfoy?" Voldemort laughed the name incredulously. "A cowardly weakling of scant magical abilities, who clings to his mother's skirts? Hardly, Harry."

He gently pulled Harry from his shoulder so that they were facing each other. Voldemort's lean, spidery fingers cupped the boy's face, the clawed thumbs against Harry's lips as they had been in Dumbledore's office. "You would prefer to be bound to any wizard alive rather than Lord Voldemort, would you not? This was done against our wills, my treasure. Unhappiness is to be expected upon occasion. We have little in common but these dreams and our miserable, Muggle childhoods."

A frown tugged at the corners of his lips, taken hostage by the tender

press of those long fingers. "That's not entirely true," protested Harry, who was momentarily distracted by the way his mouth moved against the pads of Voldemort's thumbs. "We both get angry very easily. And... we both like to fly," he added with a grin, remembering the smile that had brightened Voldemort's sharp features as they'd spiralled together through the clouds. "And, er," his cheeks collared, "we enjoy doing other things together as well." *Shut up, Harry. Just shut up.* He bit his disobedient tongue before it could mortify him any further. The magical smoke seemed to be carrying the words from his brain straight to his mouth before he could even process them properly.

"Ah... yesss..." Voldemort placed a thin smile almost to Potter's lips and both of their mouths pressed against the milky, long-nailed thumbs which bracketed the kiss while the rest of the Dark Lord's pale fingers cradled Potter's cheeks possessively. It was a waste to disregard the simple pleasure offered to him in these dreams. Voldemort could devote more serious contemplation to the matter of his young Horcrux when awake. For the moment, this would have to suffice. *Patience*, Voldemort schooled himself, *patience...* "Perhaps you would remind me as to the *particulars* of those things we both enjoy so much? To what *precisely*, dear Harry, are you referring?" The forked tongue slipped out to playfully lick the air just shy of Potter's lips.

Harry's next exhale was not very steady, but he was extremely proud that he shivered only slightly, head still spinning with Voldemort's sudden proximity. "Oh, I, um..." he smiled softly, suddenly bereft of the traitorous words that had flown so readily to his lips only moments ago. Voldemort needed only to press his mouth against his own, and Harry's coherence seemed to simply evaporate like the rising azure smoke on the air. "I think you know exactly what I mean," he breathed against the Dark Lord's fingers, looking up through his lashes with darkening eyes. "But... but maybe we could do with some reminding." His fingers wound of their own volition into Voldemort's robes, and he took the tip of one of the slender white thumbs between his lips, his cheeks flushing as he kissed it tenderly.

"Indeed, I do not know." The crimson eyes were wicked. "Now, how shall we, ah..." Voldemort shifted atop Harry with a rustle of red silk, "*stimulate* our memories?"

A hot shiver wracked through Harry's body. He was getting lost in this pleasure - all the places Voldemort's body touched Harry's, eyes so bright and burning and glimmering with lovely promise. The boy

squirmed beneath the Dark Lord's weight, barely resisting the urge to pull him down against him. Excitement was climbing steadily in his veins - it had been a very long time since he'd bothered protesting the feverish rush of sensation that Voldemort's touches and kisses brought him, and Harry could no longer deny how much he enjoyed this, thought about this, *longed* for this. Dreamed of this, even, regardless of whether the Dark Lord was there to join him. Such a pleasant escape from the complications of the rest of his life, and Harry was more than happy to seize the opportunity, even if Voldemort would make him beg for it before he was through.

Well, Harry wasn't going to beg, not if he could help it. "We could always try retracing our steps," he whispered with a shy smile instead, raising his mouth to Voldemort's, not quite touching. He could feel the Dark Lord's breath ghosting across his lips, the promise of pleasure buzzing heavy in the wonderful space between their mouths. Eyes fluttering shut, the boy leaned slowly forward, heart pounding hard against his ribcage -

And his lips met only with cool night air, the robes unravelling like vapour beneath his fingers. For one long moment, Harry hoped desperately that Voldemort had simply vanished his clothing the way he had vanished Harry's earlier that day - that he would still be there, long fingers and scarlet eyes trailing fire across his skin - but when Harry opened his eyes, he saw only the dim outline of his four poster curtains, a very empty bed.

Thankfully, none of his sleeping dorm mates awoke at the very loud groan of exasperation from Harry's bed as the Gryffindor flopped back down on the mattress, frustration welling up cold and painful in the space that had so shortly ago been filled with happiness at Voldemort's touch.

"We could always try retracing our steps..." Voldemort gave an anticipatory hiss, leaning forward into Potter's lips as they curled into a smile. Harry's bright eyes lost their playful gleam as he abandoned the game of words and gained an eager, sultry light. Voldemort had the feeling of one who awakens from sleep only to turn again and drift back to slumber. Except he had been dreaming all this while and here rest was not closing his eyes but losing himself in the blissful sensation - yet it was *more* than mere sensation. An indescribable bliss which at once repelled and enraptured the Dark Lord.

Then Harry fell away into soft darkness still undisturbed by dawn.

Grinding his teeth, the Dark Lord let out something between a hiss and a grunt, rubbing his eyes. His interactions with Potter still appeared to abide by the cruelly perverse timing of common dreams - ending precisely when one most wished for them to continue.

Voldemort rose, robing his nakedness, and walked slowly towards a swathe of black damask. White fingers drew away the curtain of fabric, behind which lay a reflection; ghostly in the darkness. The Dark Lord stroked a hand down the cold glass. The livid eyes staring back at him were half-closed and thoughtful. It was a beautiful mirror, its edges decorated with fine silver. Much time and thought had gone into its enchantment: such sweet irony.

For Lord Voldemort, inspired by the bitterness of past defeat, had chosen not to keep his precious Horcruxes in a strong box or a vault. Though he would never admit as much, Dumbledore's notion to protect the Philosopher's Stone had been a brilliant one, and it pleased Voldemort to have the old man's own trickery brought to bear against him. Only those whose deepest wish it was to treasure his Horcruxes and keep them safe from all harm could retrieve the vessels from the glass.

"Show me..." Voldemort whispered, for to any but a Parselmouth it was nothing more than a commonplace vanity. There was no backwards writing announcing its function to all, merely a tiny serpent hidden in the ornamentation, which hissed its acquiescence as the surface rippled to comply with the Dark Lord's desire.

Yet he had not come to retrieve his Horcruxes but to gaze at the vision the mirror revealed. The Voldemort in the mirror was entwined in Potter's limbs. Although the two figures were mute as glass, their mouths moved with words of passion as their skin and breath mingled. Voldemort watched the two figures for a long while, a sigh misting the image, before he turned away, letting the curtain fall once more across the mirror.

He needed to kill something, watch a pair of eyes grow dull and lungs gasp out their final exhale. Some simple pleasure to ease his mind.

Dumbledore's hand was still black and shrivelled, the wrinkles in his face exaggerated with exhaustion. Harry couldn't help but cringe when he entered the office, looking upon his headmaster with the terrible, certain knowledge of his death fresh in his memory. *Within the next year*, Voldemort had said, and didn't Dumbledore look it now,

his face so strangely pale and tired, and his body sagging in the big headmaster's chair. His expression lightened immediately, however, upon Harry's entrance, and his good-natured, twinkling gaze set him somewhat at ease. For now, Dumbledore was still alive and powerful. Dumbledore would still look out for him.

"You've had quite the exciting weekend, I hear," said Dumbledore as Harry seated himself across the desk. "Miss Bell is very lucky that you and Auror Savage arrived when you did."

"Yes," Harry agreed, trying not to look uncomfortable. "How is she doing, sir?"

"She is currently under the care of the best and brightest at St. Mungo's. I expect she will be making a full recovery, especially after Auror Savage's quick thinking. It was - fortunate - that Auror Savage seemed to be so familiar with the Dark Arts."

"Yes, sir," said Harry, feeling distinctly uncomfortable now.

Dumbledore fixed Harry with a piercing look. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Harry?"

Harry's heart caught in his throat. No way, there was absolutely no chance that he was telling Dumbledore about anything that had happened. Not only would Dumbledore think Harry had gone completely round the bend - kissing Voldemort? *snuggling* with Voldemort? - but he would surely lock Harry up somewhere remote and horrible if he knew how intimate the Chosen One had become with the Darkest wizard of their time.

So, naturally, Harry blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "It was Malfoy!"

Blue eyes lined with crow's feet blinked from behind half-moon spectacles. This apparently had not been the answer the Headmaster had been expecting. "Malfoy? Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes," said Harry quickly, eager to finally voice his suspicions to someone with authority - and to seize such an opportune distraction. "He's been acting strangely ever since term started - we saw him in Borgin and Burkes, Professor - and Auror Savage himself said that it must've been an amateur. It *must* have been Malfoy, sir, I'm sure of it." He tried not to look too proud of himself for this bit of detective work.

There was a short pause in which Dumbledore gazed thoughtfully at

his withering hand before he spoke again. "I assure you, Harry, that I am thoroughly investigating anyone who may have been involved in the incident." The old man frowned. "But I believe it is past time now to begin our next lesson. I have a very important memory to show you today."

The wizard lay spread-eagled in the snow, pale eyes staring up at stars he would never see. A stark, black-robed shadow stood over the dead wizard in the small garden of a cottage on the outskirts of Upper Flagley.

Voldemort had given his prey enough time and enough memories to make his report to the Ministry and Dumbledore, and then come for him in the early evening – just before sunset – when even aurors might imagine themselves safe. Light slowly vanished from the winter sky as Voldemort smiled coldly down at the dead man. Pathetic. He had held back on the Killing Curse - it had been a proper duel to merit the magic Savage had cast on poor Katie Bell. Fortune had favoured his plan. Rasalhague Savage had drawn on some of the memories Voldemort had given him, so that when the Ministry examined the wand lying beside the dead hand, they would find evidence of a surprising knowledge of ancient magic. The sort of knowledge the Dark Lord had to have on his side, or else extinguish as a threat. Everyone knew that Voldemort had spies everywhere. Of course he would have heard of Auror Savage's impressive display in Hogsmeade.

The Dark Lord turned and pulled out three books from under his cloak. Long, spidery fingers released the tomes, which floated across the snow-covered lawn through the open door of the cottage, settling on Savage's bookshelves, slipping in among more innocuous volumes as though they had always been there.

Yet Voldemort was dissatisfied. It had not been enough. Certainly the man was talented, but it would have taken four such experienced sorcerers to provide Lord Voldemort with anything resembling a real fight. The Dark Mark exploded into the sky, raining brilliant green light upon the snow as Voldemort vanished into the darkness.

"She *sold* Slytherin's locket, just like that?" said Harry, almost an hour later, after they had surfaced from the Penseive. "And only for ten Galleons?-"

"She was quite desperate," said Dumbledore as he sat back down behind his desk. "You see, Harry, it is my suspicion that Merope

stopped using magic altogether after she was abandoned by her husband. It is very likely that she no longer wished to be a witch after his rejection, to the point where she would not even use her magic to save her own life."

"But what about her son?" said Harry, aghast. "She wouldn't use magic even to stay alive for him?"

Dumbledore suddenly fixed him with that piercing look again, and Harry wished he hadn't said anything. "Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort, Harry?"

There was an awful beat of silence in which Harry's mouth went dry, his lungs constricted, and his eyes widened with the sudden certainty that Dumbledore knew - he knew *everything* - it was all right there in his blue eyes with their knowing twinkle that suddenly did not seem so good-natured anymore. "I - of course not - " Harry stammered quickly, but he was mercifully saved from elaborating by three short, urgent raps on the office door.

Dumbledore's gaze softened and he rose from his seat. "You'll have to excuse me for a moment, Harry," said the Headmaster. "I should only be a minute." And he exited the room, his hand looking black as ever against his lavender robes.

The portraits immediately began to murmur in Dumbledore's absence, the most prominent among them Phineas Nigelleus, who was none-too-quietly expressing how he would deal with Harry Potter's impertinence if he were still headmaster. Harry ignored them, trying very hard to regain his composure. There was no chance that Dumbledore could know. Suspect, perhaps, but no more than that. If Harry simply got a hold of himself, perhaps he could still convince his headmaster...

Voldemort was reading when he felt it later that evening. A spike of fear. The Dark grimoire fell from Voldemort's lap, its arcane pages spilling from their old, haphazard binding. Crimson eyes widened as the Dark Lord saw the Headmaster's office, bedecked with its usual quota of pointless silvery devices. He was wearing Hogwarts robes, his heart pumping with the terror of discovery. Had the old man found proof that he had been the one to open the Chamber of Secrets? But... it was Dippet who had been Headmaster in his time, not Dumbledore...

Harry? Voldemort called softly into what he suddenly realised must be

Potter's mind and not his own.

I didn't mean to disturb you, Potter whispered, and Voldemort felt another body sagging with relief at his presence. Sweaty hands, calloused by a broomstick, rubbed compulsively against the sides of a chair. The Dark Lord's lipless mouth stretched wide in pleasure as Voldemort closed his eyes and relaxed into Potter's nervous thoughts. It was like sinking into a hot bath. Such a welcome host. He would not have to face Dumbledore's scrutiny on his own. Voldemort would protect him. *And - and I didn't mean to leave you last night*, Potter added, chewing on his lip, and Voldemort felt the brief pain of teeth pulling at skin. The boy was wondering whether Voldemort had touched their connection with thoughts of rebuke. Nothing was further from the Dark Lord's mind.

I do not believe either of us wished to awaken last night, Voldemort said gently - eager to reassure Potter - staring curiously up at the portraits of past Hogwarts headmasters who were loudly talking amongst themselves, stopping only to shoot his Horcrux disapproving glances. The Dark Lord glared out at them, unseen. None of the portraits had ever treated Tom Riddle with such callous disregard and Harry was *his* to own, *his* to chastise or reward. These dead fools were *nothing*.

Why Harry, what is it that has you so fearful? Are you perhaps not aware that you have called to your side the greatest liar who ever attended this fine school? Voldemort chuckled and the link between them thrummed with his amusement. *Now, I cannot – naturally - teach you Occlumency in five minutes but if you concentrate on what you feel to be true, then even Dumbledore cannot catch you in a lie without forcibly penetrating your thoughts. Also – as with any battle – it helps if you are able take the high ground. Use Dumbledore's own weapon against him. Guilt was ever his favourite tool to pry at the minds of students. And of what crime, after all, are you guilty? I daresay that by secretly meeting with me you saved the life of Miss Bell.*

Relief coursed through Potter and a smile stretched across his face to match Voldemort's own, the portraits and their jarring insensitivity forgotten. *The truth. That's... brilliant. We really did save her life, didn't we? Perhaps I can convince Dumbledore to send you a thank-you note, the kind with the frilly silver ribbon.* A full-fledged, playful grin now. *I recall you're quite fond of that, aren't you? He'd make it out to Savage, but I'm sure you could find a way to get at his post.*

Lord Voldemort swallowed his irritation at Potter's impertinence,

loathing the boy's stifled laughter. At the same time, the Dark Lord could feel amusement and new found confidence calling to his spirit. He quivered within Potter's mind – caught between warring emotions. Eventually he determined that such familiarity was (for want of better description) a necessary evil. Potter was attempting to *share* his presumptuous, juvenile humour with Voldemort. Better to accept such gestures and reap the false security they provided. Still, it cut the Dark Lord's pride deep to reign in the urge to chastise his young Horcrux with a vicious flash of psychic claw. Voldemort did his best to cleave to the matter at hand. *Ah, regarding Auror Savage –*

Dumbledore walked back in, cutting off Voldemort's words as the Dark Lord's attention immediately snapped to the Headmaster. He was very pleased to see that the old man's hand was as blackly shrivelled as ever. Dark satisfaction thrilled through him, quickly followed by the ever-present, bitter fury: it was far, far less than Dumbledore deserved for destroying his grandfather's ring.

Harry had only a moment to consider how ironic this situation was - seeking Lord Voldemort's advice on how to lie to his most favourite professor - before the door to the office swung open and Harry was forced to wipe the goofy smile from his face. A goal that was made much easier when the boy caught sight of the very grim expression that Dumbledore wore.

"Is everything all right, sir?" Harry asked with genuine concern. All worries of Dumbledore's discovery of Harry's tryst with the Dark Lord was momentarily forgotten; the headmaster looked very disturbed as he closed the door behind him.

"I'm afraid not," said Dumbledore. His gait was slow as he returned to his desk; Harry was once more briefly struck by how small and withered he looked in the big chair. Dumbledore could fill up the huge Great Hall with his presence by merely rising to his feet, but the curse in his hand was clearly burdening him tonight with every one of his many years.

But his gaze, when he turned it on Harry again, was as piercing and unnerving as ever. "I am sorry to tell you, Harry, that Auror Savage has been killed."

Harry felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. Shock and betrayal welled in his chest; Harry only remembered to curb his expression at the last minute before Dumbledore could notice how deeply affected

Harry was by this information.

"His body was found outside his home below the Dark Mark just after sunset." Dumbledore, looking very troubled and quite unaware of Harry's distress, gave a heavy sigh. "I have a confession to make, Harry. I did not think Auror Savage capable of the sort of magic that he displayed in Hogsmeade yesterday, and I was concerned that he was compromised - and that, further, you were intentionally concealing his peculiar behaviour from me. It is clear from the Ministry's investigations tonight, however, that Auror Savage was very well-educated in the sort of ancient magic necessary to cast the counter-spell he did yesterday. I believe I owe you an apology."

Harry hardly heard what Dumbledore was saying. He felt at once numb and consumed by anger. At the very last minute, Harry recalled Voldemort's advice, but his attempt at worsening the headmaster's guilt was half-hearted at best. "You said you wouldn't keep anything from me anymore," he responded hoarsely, only barely managing to make his tone accusatory. An Auror was dead. An innocent, well-meaning man had been killed tonight, and it was all Harry's fault.

"A mistake I shall not repeat again, my dear boy," said Dumbledore as he leaned forward in his chair, blue eyes shining with sincerity. "You've been very distant lately, Harry. Your friends are concerned for you. I was beginning to fear that the Horcrux was affecting you more than you realized."

Harry's heart wrenched in his chest, seizing Dumbledore's words and remembering Voldemort's part in this conversation. *You did this*, he thought fiercely at the Dark Lord, anger burning in his gut. *How could you do this? Savage didn't do anything to anyone! He didn't even remember what had happened!* But deep in his heart, the worst of Harry's loathing was reserved for himself. It was his, Harry's, fault that Auror Savage had been murdered so brutally. Harry was the one who had invited Voldemort into Hogsmeade; it was *Harry's* selfishness that had created this entire mess in the first place.

Poisonous triumph rose within Lord Voldemort to have tricked Dumbledore so easily and so thoroughly. He ought to know better than to trust to *Ministry* investigations. How *weak* the headmaster appeared! A diminished, old man with death creeping up upon his wrinkled flesh. Voldemort drank deep through Potter's senses, glutting himself on Dumbledore's fast-approaching expiration. The Dark Lord bit down on a mad, icy gust of mirth. How foolish the Headmaster had

been to denounce Dark magic when - thanks to that same beautiful, deadly power - Dumbledore would be mouldering in his grave while he, Lord Voldemort, pursued life immortal.

A stab of rage shot through his chilly amusement as Potter began to berate him on behalf of the dead wizard. *He was hardly a child*, Voldemort spat at the boy. *I have not broken my word. For thirteen years the Aurors hunted me and now it is my pleasure to hunt them in return. I have granted the death of Auror Savage purpose! Instead of a pointless demise at the hands of my followers, he has been given the rare honour of having been of service to Lord Voldemort.* Cold, irrepressible laughter wriggled out through the cracks in the Dark Lord's psyche. *Do you not think my plan was brilliant, dear Harry? I believe I may have a knack for whisking you out from under Dumbledore's crooked nose and into my waiting arms.*

Harry thought he might be sick. Voldemort's macabre delight overwhelmed him, completely discordant with the aching responsibility that Harry felt for Savage's death. *He was innocent*, Harry insisted furiously, clinging to his anger - seemingly the only thing he presently shared with the parasitic Dark Lord lurking in his soul. Rage, hot and vicious, was climbing in his chest - at what Voldemort had done, at what Dumbledore was concealing from him, and especially at the Dark Lord's callous implication. *You'll have a much worse time whisking me anywhere if you go on killing innocent people.*

"It's just been a lot to take in," Harry bit out through gritted teeth. He was aware that he needed to respond, but he was unable to look his professor in the eye as he struggled with the conflicting emotions warring inside him. "That the only way to stop all of this is for me to - to die."

"Do not resign yourself to death so soon, Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "There may be another way. We may yet be able to destroy the Horcrux in your scar - but that is a conversation for another time."

"Right." Harry rose to his feet, stomach churning with repulsion, the scar in question still throbbing with Voldemort's icy anger. Destroy the Horcrux? The idea was beyond Harry's comprehension, especially when said Horcrux was nearly engulfing his own emotions with Voldemort's at the moment. Harry did not even trust himself to look at Dumbledore again. Would his headmaster see Voldemort lounging so comfortably in the forefront of Harry's mind, the colour red seeping

into the whites of his eyes? How could he speak of destroying the link between them when he knew *nothing* - when he had no clue of how intertwined their souls had become? "I think I need to go, Professor."

Harry hardly heard Dumbledore bid him goodnight. He did not head toward the Gryffindor common room, but to the Grand Staircase.

He began his descent down the stairs with steadfast determination. He wasn't so far gone - he was still the master of his thoughts, notwithstanding the Dark Lord that had curled himself around Harry's mind like a snake. Harry was in control. Harry would not be affected.

Thinking of sacrificing yourself, Harry? Voldemort leered. The high, chilly voice was utterly dismissive. Then the Dark Lord's words softened to something that might have been gentleness were it not for the threat implicit in each softly hissed syllable, silken tone waspish with cruelty: *This is not a battle you can win. Only Lord Voldemort can kill you, Harry Potter. What would your Muggle mother think – after all the effort she went to in order to save her precious son?*

Harry saw red.

"Don't talk about my mother!" Harry's bellow echoed against the stairway's high ceiling, and his stupid, useless wand was in his hand in about three seconds flat even though there was no one there. He brandished it before him anyway - ("are you sure those glasses are working, four-eyes, there's no one here for me to curse") - his eyes wild and furious. "Don't you *DARE* - you can't just -"

In the next moment, Harry's skull split clean in two, and his words got lost in a strangled cry. His scar was a fiery brand on his forehead, and Harry forgot about his mother and the staircase and his wand. He fell to his knees, slipping and stumbling down the steps (*like another staircase but that was dark and there was glass in his skin and the air stank of a dead man's blood*). He was hardly able to keep from crying out, icy-hot pain he hadn't felt in many weeks - not since the dreams had started and Voldemort had transformed from something terrifying and deadly to a person who drank white wine and kissed his forehead and knew a childhood in an orphanage just as lonely as Harry's cupboard and *understood*.

But he was still terrifying and he was still deadly. And Harry, whose knees were throbbing almost as badly as his scar as the pain receded, who had caused an innocent man's death today with his own foolishness - Harry could not afford to forget this.

"I hate you," he hissed, face hot with anger, but Voldemort had vanished.

"You're not such a pleasant bloke yourself," the wand Filch had given him retorted from a few steps below. Harry stuffed it in the waistband of his jeans before it could say anything else.

The corridors were deserted this time of the evening, so thankfully none but the portraits bore witness to this episode on the stairs. Thoughts of his mother swam through his pounding head as he continued down, feet moving mechanically, leading inevitably to thoughts of his father, then Sirius. What would they think of him now? Luring Lord Voldemort to a quiet wizarding village outside the school, endangering the lives of hundreds of students - after everything they had gone through to keep him safe and alive, and here Harry was, handing his life over to the Dark Lord that had spent the better part of sixteen years trying to murder him.

When he arrived at the huge, wooden doors at the Entrance Hall, Harry came to a stop, bewildered. He realized his legs were carrying him to the Quidditch Pitch - an instinct born of many restless evenings relieved by the slice of his broom through the air, the smooth wood that followed the call of his fingertips as naturally as his holly wand. This thought was a kick to his stomach. His Firebolt was still at Malfoy Manor with his wand, probably rotting beneath the bush where he had left it during yet another foolish and ill-advised meeting with the Dark Lord.

Swallowing, Harry resolved himself to an aimless stroll through the corridors, rubbing his scar with the heel of his hand every few moments as a stray prickle of pain shot through it like an aftershock. He could at least avoid his friends until curfew. Besides, he needed to think, to plan. And most importantly, he needed to figure out how to stop Voldemort - or how to stop the dreams and the heat and the confusion - before it was too late.

Jealousy, older than Tom Riddle could remember, raised itself within him like a threatened cobra. His mouth was full of venom. Aching, swollen glands leaked poison, mixing with bile that had burned its way up his oesophagus. The Dark Lord passed beyond rage in that moment, gripped instead by a numbness of spirit he had seldom felt since his rebirth. Voldemort hissed and spat the poison into a pale hand, where it steamed oddly against his white skin. The gift of Nagini - *dear Nagini* - who had hosted his mind longer than any other

creature. Her will was a bulwark against death as much as Voldemort's own. It was only fitting – since his snake had cared for him and nurtured his weak, homunculist body with her milk – that the Dark Lord should have been reborn in her image rather than that of his filthy Muggle father. He had *surpassed* mere humanity. "*Nagini!*" He stood, not seeming to notice the old book lying at his feet where he had let it fall.

Yet the ache was more than toxins pooling in his mouth. It was a deep, terrible thing he had thought himself beyond long ago. *How weak you are, Tom Riddle...* came a voice far more poisonous than any venom.

I am Lord Voldemort! It was a fierce curse wielded against the terrible voice. But the words did not cut it to ribbons as they should, nor did the smooth noise of scales against stone serve to quiet Voldemort's discomfort. He lowered an arm to allow the great snake to slide up around his shoulders. Why should he feel thus? The foolish boy might fight his destiny, but it would not matter in the end.

For Lord Voldemort shall triumph and Potter – along with every other magical being in Britain – would either fall into line or watch his friends die. Why, he would not even have to break his word to the boy. They would all be of an age to slaughter soon enough. Scant lips stretched into a taut smile as the Dark Lord's pitiless crimson eyes glittered with malice.

Harry's thoughts were still a mess of confusion and guilt when he finally arrived back at Gryffindor tower two hours later. Guilt, confusion, self-loathing... and hope (*hopehopehope*) as bright as the sun in his eyes whenever he stopped to consider it, so bright it gave him a headache that had nothing to do with his throbbing scar. The boy climbed through the portrait hole, gave a distracted wave hello to Neville and Ginny, who were wearily watching Ron and Hermione bicker over homework, and headed, largely unnoticed, for the boys' dormitories.

A tentative plan had begun to form in Harry's mind. It was mad, a part of him knew - about as mad as the madness he had been begging himself to abandon not just two hours ago. But he had to try. He had to succeed. The consequences of failure on this level (*screaming and blood and so many bodies and Harry, trapped forever beneath Voldemort's thumb*) were too much for the young Gryffindor to consider at the moment.

And so he planned and fretted and quashed his fears with Gryffindor courage as he closed the door behind him, leaving him alone in the sixth year dormitory. He felt a little better as he bundled himself in his warmest sweater, wrapped himself in his heaviest cloak, and then felt a lot worse when he went to do a warming charm (*you were... shivering*) and his wand simply replied that there were much better ways to get warm and Harry seemed to know all about them, if the other day were any indication.

The last step - and he almost forgot this one - was his curtains, pulled tight across his bed. His dorm mates would think he had simply fallen asleep early, and Harry would be back in his four-poster by dawn. If all went according to plan, that was. Harry's mouth went a little dry at this prospect - especially considering what had happened last time that -

He bit down on the thought before he could finish it. Everything would be fine. None of this would work if he didn't begin to trust Voldemort, after all, and Voldemort would keep his word to him. He had yesterday, even though Harry hadn't trusted him, had been so quick to think badly of the person who had kissed him and touched him and

(guilt and confusion and hopehope blinding hope)

Harry found his invisibility cloak at the bottom of his trunk. Mad, this was absolutely mad, but perhaps it was mad enough to work. Voldemort was pretty mad himself. Once Harry had remembered for the second time that night that his broomstick was still at Malfoy Manor - and perhaps he could get that back, tonight, along with his wand - he had generated and discarded half a dozen ideas on how to get there, each as unlikely and dangerous as the last. He had finally settled on hunting down a Thestral in the forest, remembering how well they had gotten Harry to Voldemort the previous spring - even though that seemed like a different lifetime now, a different world entirely that didn't know the shape and pressure of the Dark Lord's mouth against Harry's lips and the warmth that spread down every notch of Harry's spine whenever he managed to make Voldemort laugh.

You're lost, Harry thought, running his fingers along the shimmery material of his invisibility cloak and watching them vanish in the folds. *You're hopeless.*

He threw the cloak over his shoulders and disappeared.

Lord Voldemort seldom had trouble sleeping. At first, it was simply a relief to be *able* to sleep again. Certainly he suffered nightmares, but waking from a nightmare was always empowering. One could laugh away a bad dream, shed its foolish terrors, and rise without fear. It was the pleasant dreams that made him suffer upon waking: to see a world ruled by Lord Voldemort and watch his enemies crumble before him and beg to kiss the hem of his robe... only to awaken and find that the everything was as it had been when he had gone to sleep... those were the dreams that haunted and tormented him throughout his days.

And now he had Harry Potter in his dreams and they were less dreams and more visions set within and between their two minds. But the Dark Lord did not wish for Potter's presence at this moment. His Horcrux was weak and foolish. He did not deserve the gift of Voldemort's company. And there was that needle of fear that it would be another dream where he, Lord Voldemort, would be vulnerable. Potter knew far too many of his weaknesses already.

He glanced at the damask shroud which covered the mirror and looked away. Voldemort did not want to see what that mirror might show him. He slipped a dark silk robe from his shoulders and sat on the edge of the bed. Nagini was off somewhere hunting rodents. He could smell their scent in his nostrils and sense her eager greed. Voldemort thought of calling her to him in order to rest against her coiling scales, but it seemed a childish thing to do.

The winter chill seeped into his cold flesh and Voldemort shivered, padding over to the fireplace, and crouching naked before the flames. The Dark Lord gave a humourless laugh and thrust his right hand into the fire. For a moment, there was no pain. Then it came, but it was not suffering beyond imagining. His lipless mouth grit in a mad rictus, Voldemort endured the agony as his frail flesh began to melt red-black and drip away from the bone. It was only the flames licking up his arm - eager for more fuel - that finally caused Voldemort to pull away with a pained hiss. Livid, crimson eyes fixed on the scorched remnants of his once elegant fingers.

And then the skin began to knit itself back together, sinew itching, wrapping itself around charred bone. The Dark Lord's breath came fast as he gazed with manic pleasure at the sight of his long nails slowly arching out of his milky skin like baby's teeth.

Voldemort laughed again and flexed his hand, brushing the smooth,

new skin across his flat face. It was still warm from the fire.

He would sleep well.

Malfoy Manor was as gloomy and horrible as Harry remembered it. A shudder came over him as he saw it rise on the horizon, a black, awful shape against the glittering night sky, before they touched down within the tall gates, the Thestral smooth and graceful in its descent.

The very first thing Harry did - after checking wildly around himself and his Thestral to make sure that there were no Death Eaters hiding along the perimeter - was run to the hedge to his left and look desperately underneath. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found his Firebolt beneath a dusting of snow, decidedly not rotted and just as wonderful as he remembered. He let his left hand trail over the handle for a moment - his right was still throbbing from where he had sliced it, rather sloppily, to attract the Thestral with the scent of his blood - before straightening up with determination. He would need his Firebolt for the Quidditch season, which resumed in a few short weeks, but that was not the real reason he'd come here.

Harry was able to unlock the front door after a few minutes of coaxing his wand ("Yes, I *know* it's ugly, but I just need an *Alohamora* from you and we'll never see it again"), and then he was inside, the bitter winter wind and his last chance to turn back behind him. It was eerily quiet in here, and Harry's stomach turned rather violently when he saw the doorway leading to the huge room with the cellar, the room where Voldemort had first kissed him and then tortured him ruthlessly until he was bleeding with glass and tears. He turned away very quickly and headed down the corridor, careful to steal as quietly as possible, a ghost in a house of (*Mr. Granger and so many others*) ghosts.

Harry didn't know where he was headed, but he felt the Horcrux within him stir, reaching forward, forward. He followed its pull, Dark magic whispering across his soul. Past a staircase, a row of doors, and then down another corridor, the Dark pulse within him growing stronger and stronger yet as he went. Voldemort was here. This thought brought a surge of pride and panic and something else, but Harry swallowed it all and remained fixated on his task. Voldemort would surely be awake – after their interaction today, the Dark Lord would hardly be eager to meet Harry in their dreams - and Harry had much to discuss with him.

He arrived at a door - and even if Harry didn't know with dizzying

certainly that this was Voldemort's door, even if his heart weren't pounding and his soul weren't leaping with *he's here right here*, he would have been able to gather this information from the door itself, which was big and solid and clearly hiding something very important behind it. He tried to turn the doorknob, but found it locked, and after a few minutes of cursing and shaking his stupid wand vigorously to no great effect, he realized that Lord Voldemort would probably protect his bedroom door with much more secure than a locking charm. Something that only he could get through. Something like -

"Open," Harry whispered before the thought had even formed fully in his mind, and the door moved like Harry's Parseltongue was a golden key. He braced himself as the door swung open - would Voldemort curse him? he hadn't prepared for this - but nothing came. The sitting room was empty.

Harry walked tentatively inside, shutting the door behind him with a soft *click*. A fire was crackling merrily in the hearth, and a blush rose unbidden to Harry's cheeks when he instantly recognized this (*can I kiss you?*) for the room in their dream. Suddenly very warm, the Gryffindor shrugged off his cloak, which was still damp with snow and cloud from his journey, and laid it across the back of a chair.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the open door near the hearth, where, if his memory served, a certain Dark Lord's bed would lie inside. And, sure enough, the bed was in the same place he remembered, and there was a dark lump underneath the covers. *Sleeping?* Harry resisted the urge to rub his eyes. He found this thought so absurd that he needed to get a closer look. He certainly hadn't planned for *this*, after all - cursing and yelling and raging, but not asleep, peaceful and docile. Harry approached closer, closer, until he was directly at the Dark Lord's bedside. The red eyes were hidden, pale face relaxed and smooth in the flickering firelight from a second hearth inside the bedroom. Surreal. Harry found himself enraptured, fascinated, by the gentle rhythm of serpentine nostrils, dilating and contracting, dilating and contracting with the flow of his breathing.

Is he dreaming? Harry wondered, quelling the sudden urge to reach out and stroke his cheek. What did he dream of when Harry wasn't there?

At that moment, Voldemort drew in a particularly deep breath and rolled to his side, a movement that made Harry bite down on his tongue to keep from making a noise of surprise. And then he saw it - poking out from underneath the feathery pillow, dark yew wood against darker sheets. Harry's eyes widened behind his glasses, and his

breathing nearly stopped in his throat.

Voldemort's wand. Lord Voldemort's wand was sitting - *right there* - right within his reach! Before Harry could stop himself, he was pulling it from underneath the pillow, ever so gently, so careful not to awaken the dangerous, terrible man whose head half-rested atop it. Adrenaline coursed through Harry's veins as the final inches slid out slowly, slowly from underneath, his face so close to Voldemort's. What would Harry do if those scarlet eyes flew open at this very moment? If they settled on Harry's hand, caught in the act of stealing Voldemort's most precious weapon?

His pleasure-edged panic was relieved when the wand slipped from underneath, and the Dark Lord's wand was a cool weight in his hand, familiar but darker, stronger. This was it - the wand that had done everything, that had split Voldemort's soul and killed Harry's parents and given Harry this bloody scar. For a moment, anger rose up in his vision, sharp and hot and overwhelming. It was too much power to rest in one thin stick of wood, and what a horrible thing it was, what terrors and atrocities it had committed.

The Gryffindor tested its pliability between his fingers, and a surge of disgust shot through him. He thought he could hate magic, in those few seconds. Everything it could do, everything it had done - as he looked at that wand, that silly, insignificant twig, he hated that such a trivial thing could give a person so much terrible power. His grip tightened, green eyes flashing. One little twig, and so many dead, so many dozens and hundreds and innocent men and women and children, infants, and *parents* -

And he could stop it. He could stop it all, right here, right now. A man could break a twig - a *boy* could break a twig, no magic required. He bent it a little further, and it was absolutely taut now, a curve of yew. A little further, and it was straining - it was so easy, such an easy thing to break - he wouldn't have to kill Voldemort after all -

A little further, and it snapped, clean down the middle with a smattering of green sparks.

Someone was there. Familiar. A white hand stretched out. "*Nagini...*?" Voldemort called softly through the comfortable haze of sleep. But there was no answering hiss. He stretched, sitting up, his left hand tingling as the spidery fingers searched for cool, musky scales. Lazily, he opened his eyes.

It was not Nagini.

Potter stood there - his cheeks high with colour, some inexplicable emotion glistening in his green eyes. The Dark Lord was still dreaming.

"Harry..." he whispered, regally inclining his head. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Harry's heart nearly stopped in his chest - *what have I done?* - as he stared, unseeing, at the broken, dead pieces of wand in his hand. The brief flare of triumph was smothered by panic. He really *had* gone mad - there was no other explanation, no other reason that he would walk into Voldemort's quarters in the dead of the night and snap his wand in two.

Hastily, the boy stuffed the broken pieces into his back pocket. His own wand made an indignant noise at sharing the space, but thankfully gave no other protests. And then Harry watched, spellbound, as Voldemort sat up slowly, thin, black silk clinging to his body, a flash of white collarbone as the Dark Lord stretched his arms. Harry realized with a jolt that Voldemort couldn't hurt him. Without his wand, he was powerless, just as vulnerable as Harry. They might as well have been dreaming.

"Hi," said Harry softly. His mouth was very dry. "I wanted to see you. I lost my temper - before. It wasn't right." He felt very stupid. Surely there had been more he wanted to say (*a plan, the plan, Harry*), but all the reasons had fled from his mind, and there was only Voldemort's broken power in his back pocket and the Dark Lord lounging so sleepy and placated and powerless on the bed. *Can I kiss you?* Harry remembered again, and he flushed, very grateful for the near-darkness that would hopefully conceal his burning cheeks.

"No, Harry, it is I who should apologise to you." Voldemort's waxen mask of a face was all smooth, sleepy contrition. "I hurt you earlier. I was angry at that fool Dumbledore for daring to suggest taking you from me, *my treasure...*" Long, elegant fingers reached for him, and Harry accepted them without a second thought, his breath suddenly shallow in his throat. Voldemort was asking him into bed - *his bed* - and the Dark Lord was hardly wearing anything at all. The pale, delicate web between thumb and forefinger caught Harry's eye, and Harry remembered how it had tasted in their dream, how the wrinkle of the Dark Lord's life line had felt beneath Harry's lips. He swallowed.

"Dumbledore can't make me do anything I don't want to," he said, and sat on the edge of the bed. The broken pieces of Voldemort's wand pressed into his backside, a reminder, and Harry swallowed again, still distracted by how near they were sitting, how cool Voldemort's fingers felt. "Oh - sorry - " The boy winced and pulled his hand away, realizing that his bleeding hand had smeared against Voldemort's palm where they had touched. It must have opened up again when he'd been straining to snap the Dark Lord's wand.

Lord Voldemort did not forgive. He did not forget. A show of regret was necessary to keep Potter under his power until the old man's death – that was all. Potter would suffer for his defiance in time. *Patience*. The Dark Lord stared at the drops of blood, so bright against his pale fingers. Harry Potter's blood. It ran through his veins now too. The cut on Potter's hand was deep and inexpertly done. Gently gripping Potter's wrist, Voldemort could feel the boy's pulse racing. The famous glasses had misted up slightly with heavy, anxious breaths. Potter was truly afraid, far more so than he had been in any dream.

This is no dream. Potter was really *here*, in his rooms. Voldemort inhaled deeply, trying to stifle the shock which flitted across his features at the realisation. Guilt. Again, there was the stench of guilt in the air. What had he done - was this still about the Auror? Panic flumed within the Dark Lord at the idea of having been so vulnerable - the thought that he, Lord Voldemort, had slept while Harry Potter had snuck into his chambers!

There was a sudden shift in Voldemort's demeanour, tension taut in the air. Harry watched as Voldemort studied his wound, crusted over and jagged, watched the change come over his face - lazy, sleepy fascination transforming into wide-eyed alertness, nervous with shock and -

Fear.

The Dark Lord looked as though he'd never seen blood in his life. For a Dark Lord who killed and tortured people on a regular basis and therefore must have seen blood by the bucket loads, there was something decidedly not right about this impression. Harry clenched his fist uncomfortably, hiding the slice in his palm, but the damage had already been done; Voldemort was looking him in the eye very strangely, and Harry resisted the urge to flee the room. The pieces of

Voldemort's wand seemed to press more insistently into his bum.

Voldemort stared at Harry, the crimson eyes aglow and the flat, serpentine face suddenly empty of all emotion. "Is there something you wish to tell me, Harry?"

The shock only seeped into Harry's expression for a moment - but of course Voldemort would know those words, because hadn't Dumbledore said the very same to Tom Riddle so many years ago, when the Chamber of Secrets had been opened the first time? Could Voldemort possibly know that Dumbledore had spoken the same way to Harry just today? Was he trying to tell him something?

"I wanted to see you," Harry repeated carefully, somehow keeping his voice even despite the way his heart was pounding wildly in his chest. "I needed to talk to you. About - about all the killings."

"You came to talk..." Voldemort mulled over Harry's words, as though testing them against the air. "But we are linked, are we not? You may speak to Lord Voldemort whenever you wish, no matter whether you are awake or lost in slumber." The high, cold voice drew out the sibilants as the Dark Lord stood and pulled a black robe around his shoulders.

A milky nail found the underside of Potter's chin, tilting it upwards so that Harry - still sitting on the bed - was staring straight up into those terrifying, livid eyes. "Do *not* lie to me, my treasure... I should not like to punish my precious one for such insolence..." But, for all its menace, Voldemort's threat was empty. The broken wand in Harry's pocket was no longer something frightening, but *powerful*, a reassurance. His spine straightened, suddenly confident - *Voldemort could not hurt him* - and the Dark Lord must have noticed, there must have been something that keyed him in to the change in Harry's thoughts, because Voldemort's face was contorting with something that looked strangely close to fear. Harry couldn't be sure; he didn't think he'd ever seen it there before. "*You - you - what have you done?!*" Voldemort hissed, and the pale fingers began to tremble against Harry's skin.

"Funny, I tried to talk to you that way before," said Harry, and rose brazenly to his feet, heart still pounding, pounding. "I don't think you were listening." But it was the same sort of fierce adrenaline that had taken hold of his veins before, when he had been stealing Voldemort's wand - tinted with excitement, with the thrill of a challenge in which he was well-matched. They stood on even ground now. Voldemort

could not hurt him.

"You can't kill innocent people," Harry said, not bothering to hide the anger from his voice. "My parents were innocent - *I* was innocent. And - I don't want you to kill any more innocent people. I tried to tell you that, but you weren't listening to me - and, I suppose I had to - take drastic measures."

He was rambling, he knew, but his heart seemed to be pounding, pounding the words right up to his mouth and he couldn't stop them, they just kept coming out. And, god, he was scared, scared as much as he was excited and angry and burning up with this tension. "I can't just sit and watch while you kill everyone!" he heard himself saying. "I can't. And now - it will finally *stop*, you -" His fingers reached into his pocket, found the splintered pieces of twig, so dead and Muggle in his hands. Harry held the remains of Lord Voldemort's wand out before him, his eyes full of challenge. He braced himself for the inevitable outburst - *can't hurt you, he can't hurt you*. "Now you won't hurt anyone anymore."

"*You dare-?*" Voldemort's voice was coldly level, but fear and fury burned inside him. His first thought was for his Horcruxes, but he did not dare glance at the shrouded glass. *The one thing he had dreaded - but it could not be true, he could not see how -*

Yet it was not the cup, the diadem, or the locket which lay broken and worthless in Harry Potter's hands.

It was his wand.

His mouth fell open and, at first, no sound came out. His beloved yew and phoenix feather weapon. His companion for so many years. The Dark Lord stared, aghast, unable to take in what he was seeing. It had once been the only thing of value Tom Riddle had possessed. How could it lie in another's palms - so lifeless, so *broken*?

There was a scream. A howl of disbelief. He could not move his fingers - could not *stop* them shaking. "*You - you -!*" But there were no words for this - this *sacrilege*. Trembling, he reached for the two pieces of polished wood. It seemed impossible that the wood did not hum with power at his touch and Voldemort pulled back as though scalded. "No, no, no..." he whispered, shaking his head, stumbling back, tripping over the silk of his long robes.

A red mist settled over his eyes and he cried out like a wounded

animal. "*You stupid child!*" The Dark Lord screamed, clawing at his own flesh because he couldn't harm Potter and every instinct he possessed was *screaming* for the boy's death. "YOU STUPID, FOOLISH, IGNORANT CHILD!" His *wand*. His wand! How glorious it had felt when he had first held it and watched green and gold sparks fly. *Yew and Phoenix feather. 13 and a half inches. A powerful wand...* Voldemort recalled Ollivander's words and the keen pleasure in the wandmaker's face. *Yes, I think we can expect great things from you, Mr Riddle, yes indeed...!*

Proof that he was not mad, but gifted as no other wizard had ever *been* gifted. He remembered when it had clattered to the floor with a rush of green light and he had longed only for a hand to wield it once more. The euphoria of being reunited with it after almost giving up hope. *How could it be broken after so much had failed to break them?*

Gone because he had allowed himself to trust Harry Potter. Had allowed himself to trust as the Potters had trusted. His chest rose and fell rapidly and his own blood dripped through his fingers. Mad, miserable laughter bubbled up within him as his surroundings seemed to burn and blur in his boiling brain. Another Potter, proving once more to Lord Voldemort how unwise it was ever to trust!

The Dark Lord staggered to his feet, bitter mirth still pouring out of him. He wanted to kill Potter. Strangle him, rip out his eyes, and subject him to the Cruciatus Curse until the boy could no longer remember his own name. The livid eyes burned bright with rage. *How dare he? HOW DARE HE?!*

Voldemort pushed past Potter and half-stalked, half-flew to his study on wings of vengeance. His feet barely touched the ground. He could hear Potter behind him, but the boy's shouts were swallowed by the ringing in Voldemort's ears. He crashed into the large desk - hardly able to see for rage. Eventually, he found the right draw. And *there it was* under his fingers and, although the holly wood was solid, it seemed to squirm - trying to escape his grip - wriggling like a worm.

His cold voice was hoarse with fury, yet still soft, still *under control*, though only he knew just how much it cost him to leash his wrath. It was not the elegant grip of a master duellist. His right fist was wrapped around its middle, ready to snap it in two. The Dark Lord held Potter's wand aloft like a Jovian lightning bolt. His waxen, serpentine face was contorted with ugly rage. The scarlet eyes shone like cheap glass. Any depth they may have had was replaced with a

terrible blankness. Voldemort's left hand clawed through the air and Potter crashed to his knees, his nose pressed against the carpet.

"They did not *want* me... none of them did... It took *hours*. Ollivander had started to talk about rare cores, foreign woods. Perhaps they knew what I was, sensed that I did not *need* them... Shied away from me like the prospective parents who came to visit the orphanage. But it *chose* me. *It adored me. It understood. It thrilled with every piece of magic we learned together. It exulted when we killed.* Do you care for your wand, Harry? You do not appear to have taken very good care of it. Why, it looks older than mine with all of these dirty fingerprints. Shall I break it, Harry? Or perhaps I shall return it to you as I *promised* I would." The Dark Lord released the wandless spell which had bound Potter to the floor. "You see, I *am* a merciful lord. Hardly the monster all of you seem to think me." He laughed.

"How naive you are, Harry, to imagine that my *wand* is what makes me the most feared sorcerer in generations. That only *children* can perform wandless spells. That Lord Voldemort requires such a thing to hurt you. Lucius told me that you once blew up your filthy aunt. I wonder how much rage you must have felt... how much you wanted to *hurt* that ignorant Muggle."

Voldemort took a deep, ragged breath through his slitted nostrils and his voice was now utterly without colour. As blank and monstrous as the Dark Lord's eyes. "*You have to mean it.* I learned that long before my eleventh birthday. I could always make bad things happen to those who deserved it, make creatures obey my will without the need to train them, and move objects without touching them. I think I shocked poor Professor Dumbledore when he delivered my Hogwarts letter. Doubtless he was envious of the power I had even then. Or perhaps he was like poor Amy, who told the priest she thought I was the devil. But she never said another word against me after I showed her what I *really* was.

"With enough power, enough *intention*, a child can *kill* without a wand - without ever knowing the words *Avada Kedavra*. Of course, it takes *effort*. Far more effort than simply waving a wand. You have to be beyond furious or beyond terrified. I split my soul long before I made my first Horcrux..." The red eyes glazed over completely, the pupils contracted to the thinnest of slits. The Dark Lord smiled. A smile without joy, without a single ounce of happiness. "Have your wand, then, dear Harry."

The long, pale fingers of Voldemort's left hand let go of the holly and

phoenix feather wand. It floated free of the skeletal hands and sailed slowly towards Potter, where it hung, suspended, waiting for its master to snatch it from the air. "Take it, and we shall see just how much my wand of yew *meant* to me."

Voldemort was going to kill him now. Harry could see this in the burn of those red eyes, so red and hot that there was hardly any black left, a volcano about to bubble over. Voldemort would kill him now. He would kill him - perhaps it would be quick, painless - and then the Horcrux would be destroyed, then Dumbledore and the rest of the Order would be free to eliminate the rest of the Horcruxes and, finally, the Dark Lord himself. All Harry had to do was reach forward and take his wand, reach forward and meet his fate.

The holly wand was sent clattering to the floor, bouncing away and out of reach. Harry did not even spare it a glance as he knocked it aside.

"No," Harry said, and his voice shook and his fingers trembled but he did not look away. "I won't fight you. There won't be any more fighting."

He won't hurt you, and Harry knew this - clung to this with desperation - despite the disaster lying dormant in those redevyes and the way Voldemort's hands had clawed at his own face as though he'd wanted to rip Harry to pieces. Harry knew this. Because Voldemort had been devastated by the sight of his wand snapped in two, and although Harry hadn't expected this, it did not fill him with terror, but with hope.

Because here was proof that Lord Voldemort could *feel*. That Lord Voldemort could care for something, and not because it was a weapon or a tool, nor because it was the source of his magic - but because it was his – it was a companion – and it had cherished him just as fervently in return.

"I needed you to listen," Harry pleaded, his voice soft. He approached the Dark Lord like he might a wild animal, cautiously, heart racing the rhythm of furious raindrops and drums. "I didn't know that it meant so much to you. Really. It was - I thought it might make you," *he won't hurt you*, "listen." Deep breath, and Harry stood right in front of Voldemort now, drawn to his full height, feeling as brave and scared as he'd ever felt. "I won't fight you anymore if it stops."

Voldemort stared at Potter as the boy slowly came into focus through the miasma of anger. No one had ever spoken to him in such a way before. The request was nonsensical. The Dark Lord made a point of listening very carefully to everything around him. He had always been attentive to Harry's words, had he not? His whole body was taut with fury and this pathetic display did nothing to ameliorate the rage thundering inside him.

Then he felt her. Felt her long body racing silently closer. *Master, I shall rip him, kill him, eat him!* Her mouth opened, slavering for prey - forked tongue extended - and he could *taste* Potter's trail of scent and vibration, and see the pulse of the boy's blood splashed across his vision in lurid colour.

"Your parents did not have their wands with them that night," the Dark Lord hissed quietly. "I remember it distinctly... They trusted in the loyalty of their friends to protect them... I thank you for reminding me how foolish it is to trust." Green scales were sliding across the carpet and yellow eyes met livid crimson. Lord Voldemort felt no desire to halt her as Nagini rose up behind Potter.

Her savage vengeance beat in his own heart, and he felt less than nothing in that moment for the boy who had so callously destroyed his wand of yew and was now *daring* to offer the Dark Lord excuses. His breath caught, his feline eyes wide with vicious glee. "A pity for you that you miscalculated, Harry. The element of surprise is quite the advantage, is it not?"

The snake struck.

Harry felt the familiar fury rise up in his chest, impatience that he was struggling to rein in. But Voldemort had no right - *no right* - to talk about Harry's parents! He had killed them in cold blood, turned his wand on Harry, landed him in a cupboard for ten years with the worst aunt and uncle imaginable - he had absolutely *no right* to talk about Harry's parents, to criticize them -

Count to ten, a small voice implored him, cutting through his fury like a knife. It sounded oddly like Hermione. *Count to ten, Harry, and calm down. He doesn't mean it. He won't hurt you.*

But as the anger began to recede - *one, two* - and he became aware of the horrifying thing that was about to happen - *four, five* - he found that it was too late.

It was like the terrible dream he'd dreamt last year, where Mr Weasley had almost ended up dead in a Ministry hallway with the taste of his blood still fresh and sweet in Harry's mouth. Except Harry was the one in danger now, and he knew he should feel terrified - should feel something other than the sickening scent of man-boy in the air above his own damn neck, the soft, warm flesh as his fangs sunk pleasantly into the throat - but he could only watch himself, paralyzed, trapped within the hungry scales of a serpent.

And then Harry was thrown back into his own body in an explosion of pain. He was vaguely aware that blood was running warm and sticky down his jumper - but mostly he could only feel the agony ripping through his throat, two points of fire that were slowly spreading outward from his neck and through his entire body.

The boy pitched forward from the force of Nagini's assault, stumbling straight into Voldemort, and then crashed into the bed, arms pin wheeling. He crumpled to his knees, crying out hoarsely. His shaking fingers flew to the wound, gently pressing against it - but it was of no use - his neck was burning, burning, and slowly engulfing his entire body in terrible pain.

"Help," he tried to say, but it came out gurgled and raggedy as he attempted to breathe - *breathe*, god dammit - through the weight settling over his body, paralyzing him. He was shaking himself apart, hands twitching, lungs convulsing, blood spilling hot and red down his front - pain that pulsed in the centre of every blood cell. *He won't hurt you*, Harry thought, and tried desperately to reach out for the Dark Lord's consciousness, just at the edge of his mind.

And pulled back just as suddenly, repulsion and horror briefly almost overwhelming the pain. Voldemort was *enjoying* this. Voldemort didn't care that Harry was dying, dying, agony beyond belief wracking his body - he was so happy that it might have made Harry sick if he weren't currently preoccupied with dying on Voldemort's floor.

"Gnyuhhhh," said Harry, and fell to his hands, head lolling uselessly. His ears were ringing, and there was blood dripping on the carpet. A numbness was settling over his body now, the ringing so loud that he could no longer hear his harsh breathing, his pounding heart - was Voldemort speaking? He couldn't tell. His eyes rolled back, and his stomach clenched up, but no bile came.

So this was what it was to die.

Part VII

There was something so blissfully *final* about watching Harry Potter collapse. And, for a moment, Lord Voldemort felt nothing but triumph: pure, vengeful exultation unclouded by sentiment. It was *right*. His senses were thick with Nagini's hungry voice as she circled the boy in preparation to feast.

Slowly, as he watched, the fury which clotted the Dark Lord's mind began to dissipate. "*No...*" The word came out hoarse and indecisive. The righteous emotion of a kill - *of revenge* - gave way to dissatisfaction and disgust. No matter how much it was deserved, Harry Potter could *not* be permitted to die.

"*Away, Nagini!*" he spat impatiently when the giant snake protested that he had *promised* her Harry Potter. The boy's breath was shallow, harsh with pain. The Dark Lord walked back to his study and picked up Potter's wand. He might be able to kill without one, but healing anyone but himself with his bare hands was not something in which Voldemort was particularly skilled. Wandless magic was governed by emotion. Healing with it was, ironically, probably more within Potter's range than his own. The holly wand resisted the Dark Lord, buzzing slightly and shooting out red sparks. Voldemort hissed at it, bending down to examine the boy's neck.

Pleasure was still pooling in his stomach, but something else swirled within him as he knelt in Harry's blood and brushed a pale hand across the boy's limp face. *Oh, Harry, you foolish child*. There was something endearing and unexpected in the helpless, supine body. *Do not leave me...* Voldemort ground his teeth against such sentiment for this boy who had betrayed him.

He would have to remove the venom. The protective magic he had cast would protect Harry's life, but the poison was still deadly. It could easily paralyse or permanently damage the child. Voldemort's spells offered Potter no protection from a snake immersed in that very same magic. The Dark Lord put his lips to Harry's neck. He remembered this taste, mixed with unicorn blood. Life – sweet and cruel. It tingled and burned his tongue a little. He whispered magic against the skin as he sucked, gesturing with Potter's recalcitrant wand.

Eventually, when all traces of the venom had been removed from his Horcrux's blood, Lord Voldemort gently levitated Potter into the soft armchair by the fire, covering him with a quilt. Black cloth was

wrapped expertly around the boy's neck, which now smelt of salve and Blood Replenishing Potion. Potter's filthy clothes had been stripped away, replaced by one of Voldemort's own under-robos. The Dark Lord stood behind the chair, his white fingers idly stroking Harry's newly unbloodied hair.

Nagini's milk had strengthened him; he inhaled deeply, flat nostrils widening at the warm, herb-scented air. He liked this. He liked that he had been the cause of Potter's injury and that he had been the one to heal the boy.

Yet... yet it had not given him clarity. Voldemort felt no regret, but it was unfortunate how close he had come to permitting one of his Horcruxes to kill the other. In his secret heart, he knew that his mind was balanced upon a knife's edge. Death could never come for Harry, no matter what the provocation. *Madness*. Voldemort closed his eyes, pulling his hand away from the soft, unruly hair. He longed for his wand of yew. It had always calmed him to roll it between his fingers.

When Harry awoke, it was to the aching absence of fingers in his hair.

But that was a strange thing to miss, wasn't it? No one had been touching him. In fact, when Harry had last closed his eyes, it had been to (*numb settling over the agony in his veins I'm going to die*) nothing like the sensation he was currently mourning.

It took too much effort to open his eyes. Harry opened them anyway.

The room swam with light from the fireplace, blurry without his spectacles. Fireplace. Voldemort. *I've been attacked*, Harry remembered with an urgency that startled him. He jerked upright in his seat - and regretted the sudden motion almost immediately, for he was very sore all over, especially on his neck.

His neck. The snake-bite. Right. Harry raised very tentative fingers to his throat, half-expecting the blood to still be pouring freely from the twin puncture wounds, but instead met only with soft cloth, wrapped like a bandage around his throat. And that was even stranger. Was he sure he wasn't back at Hogwarts? There was absolutely no way that Voldemort had wrapped a bandage around his throat - and, further, nursed him back to life. Harry's stomach turned as he recalled the savage joy that had consumed the Dark Lord, watching Harry Potter draining his life away on his floor. Definitely not Voldemort, then.

Good one, Harry. Excellent plan. It's a real wonder why Dumbledore

doesn't trust you with any valuable information beyond his favourite flavour of jam.

Swallowing, Harry moved his head very slowly to the left, and then to the right. He felt as though he weighed five hundred tons, as though it took every ounce of his energy for the simple act of looking about the room. Weakly, the Gryffindor cleared his throat. When his voice finally came, it was small and hoarse, the voice of a stupid, injured boy. "Is... is anyone there?"

"Harry..." Voldemort's voice was a sibilant sigh as he seated himself in the armchair opposite Harry. Without his glasses, the Dark Lord was little more than a black and white blur by the fireside. But Harry could still feel him; feel the prickle of his destructive magic. "Harry, forgive me... I need you... I need you more than you can imagine. If I lose one more of my Horcruxes... well, it is not simply a question of immortality." The Dark Lord shivered and leaned closer to the flickering light, his voice a quiet hiss. Matter-of-fact. Cold.

Anger tried to rear its ugly head, but Harry was tired, so tired, and it only managed to spark the weakest of flares within him. He felt numb; he did not think he understood what he was hearing correctly. "You watched her bite me," he said softly, his voice very flat. There was not a trace of emotion in it. "I nearly - died. And you were - you were happy about it. I felt it."

"You displeased me greatly. I was upset. And you are surely aware that I am not... not always..." The ice of Voldemort's voice broke in that pause, falling into the bleak misery beneath. "My mind is not what it once was..." These last words were less than a whisper – Harry had to strain to hear them.

The breath in Harry's throat caught on its way to his mouth. "Sometimes.. I do things I don't mean when I'm upset, too." He remembered shouting at the top of his lungs at his two best friends in Grimmauld Place, smashing as many of Dumbledore's expensive trinkets he could get his hands on, snapping a yew wand into two splintered pieces. "I was... counting to ten, you know," he added, giving a weak, breathy laugh. It died quickly on his lips; his throat ached with every vibration.

"You do not understand!" Lord Voldemort shrieked. There was a long silence and when the Dark Lord spoke again it was almost as though he weren't talking to Harry at all, but musing quietly to himself. "It can become impossible to think beyond... beyond my desire to mete

death out to all those who defy or displease me. To make them *suffer*. I am *Lord Voldemort*! I am the most *powerful* sorcerer in the world and I shall live forever. But I fear..." The soft voice hitched slightly. "I fear I am losing my mind. And if I lose another Horcrux..."

Something twisted inside Harry's aching chest. Voldemort sounded very lost and alone, gazing into the fireplace, weighted down with the burden of his admission. It touched something within him, melted his anger that Voldemort was only keeping Harry alive for himself, that he'd only saved Harry out of fear for his own sanity. "I don't think you're mad," he said, his voice still very small and quiet. "You aren't mad when we're dreaming. And - you shouldn't lose any more Horcruxes if you just feed your snake properly." He tried for a smile.

Voldemort glanced across at Harry, two hazy crimson pools of crimson shining in the firelight. "You are right; it is easier for me to think when our minds are entwined." Robes rustled as Voldemort stood and walked towards where Harry sat, his tall silhouette eclipsing the flames. Long, cool fingers brushed tenderly up through the boy's jet-black hair and a lipless mouth pressed softly against his scarred forehead. At the first touch, Harry melted into the armchair, the connection between them eradicating the lingering ache in his veins from the burn of Nagini's venom. He heard Voldemort's voice speaking in his soul: *Stay with me*.

Harry grasped loosely at the thin, black robes draped over Voldemort's frame, unwilling to let him draw back again. He tried to gather his thoughts, remember his plan, and make his demands. This was exactly what he had been waiting for - this was the moment to lay out his cards. But, "I wanted to," was all he said instead, his voice weak as his eyelids fluttered shut - *so tired*. "That's why I came here. I was hoping we could... talk."

"You simply do not know when to admit defeat, Harry Potter." Voldemort chuckled softly and Harry could just imagine one corner of the thin mouth lifting in bitter acknowledgement of Harry's stubborn nature. "Very well, Lord Voldemort shall listen to what you have to say." The Dark Lord paused and heaved an irritated sigh. "But if you *dare* start bleating about the power of love, like that old goat Dumbledore..."

Absurdly, Harry felt his face grow warm with embarrassment. *Lovemaking*, he remembered the question that had been on the tip of his tongue the previous day, the word - and the memory - that stubbornly refused to leave his thoughts. "No," Harry

said, perhaps a little too quickly. "Nothing about, er, love." He swallowed. "I thought we could make an agreement. If you... still want me to stay, that is." Harry's voice was still weak and uncertain, but his fingers loosened in the silk of Voldemort's robes when he realized the Dark Lord was not going to leave him in the immediate future.

"Harry..." Voldemort admonished quietly, drawing even closer to the nervous boy. "Perhaps I ought not to have made that bargain with you... I see that it has given you a misguided hope. I cannot forsake what I am any more than you. And - even if I were to allow myself to be persuaded by whatever folly you are about to suggest - I remain Lord Voldemort. My very name is an instrument of fear."

"But why must you kill so many people?" Harry demanded, his energy returning to him in a burst of determination. His brow furrowed, his eyes bright and accusing, even though part of him wanted nothing more than to lean completely into Voldemort's aura, safe and whole as it enveloped his soul. "Why can't there be another way? Plenty of people have, er, ruled the world without murdering masses of people. And," he added bravely, hope swelling in his aching chest - the one offer he could make, the one thing he had to give to the Dark Lord - "I... I could stay with you. We wouldn't need to fight anymore." He was fully aware of how ridiculous he must look - swaddled in bandages, blind, wandless, and attempting the impossible - but he still couldn't help but hold his breath, heart pounding wildly, hope stringing tight every muscle in his body.

"Harry, *Harry*..." An indulgent smile broke through the Dark Lord's pale mask of a face. Cold, white fingers caressed Potter's nervous, stubborn features. Harry's trembling lips and dark eyebrows - arched with determination - filled Voldemort with a rare pity for the boy. What chance did a child truly have against Lord Voldemort? "You must have felt pleasure when Quirinus crumbled away beneath your fingers? I remember screaming for your death, vainly trying to force his dying body to obey as I felt my servant's flesh fail..." A shadow fell across Voldemort's face as the crimson eyes vanished beneath hairless, waxen lids.

After a long moment, they reopened. "Professor Slughorn often told me that he confidently expected me to become Minister of Magic by the age of thirty." He withdrew from Potter's arms, reminded of the pain and bitter failure the boy's touch had brought him. Voldemort began to pace about the room, dark robes rustling. "*Minister Riddle*," his thin mouth curled away from sharp teeth in disgust. "He did not

know, of course, that I had already wedded myself to the old ways. I am not speaking of Muggles and Mudbloods, but of the darkest of arts. I am told that you have met the memory of Lord Voldemort at sixteen, Harry. Deep in manipulation and blood, even at such a tender age. A Monster." The Dark Lord laughed. His high voice gave lie to the softness of his words. Voldemort's amusement sang like chill steel.

"I was never a bully like the Malfoy child or the Muggle cousin I have seen in your thoughts. Such petty triumphs were not to my taste. My first kill was a rabbit. I had fallen out with its puerile owner and wished to punish him. My goal was not to humiliate or shame the other boy. I was chasing a purer satisfaction: grief. But in the act of killing the creature, I stumbled upon happiness. I was so giddy with emotion that it took me some time to hang the wretched thing from the rafters with my magic..."

Voldemort seated himself once more in the other chair, letting out a hiss of frustration. "It is *killing* which calms my nerves. My thoughts are blissfully purged by the act of meting out death. I feel no regret because it is my belief that death is something all those who allow themselves to be killed deserve. As regards your proposal, Harry, I do not decline it as an ambitious Dark Lord, but as a wizard who knows not to make promises he cannot keep. Of course it is possible to rule without death, but you ask me to give up one of the chief pleasures of my existence. My treasure, I have confided to you things I long thought would remain forever locked within the confines of my mind. But these weaknesses do not make me human. I myself do not know what I am." A skeletal hand gestured distractedly up at his serpentine features. "Dumbledore is fond of calling this face my *mask*, as though there were something hiding behind it..."

The red eyes – which had been staring at the fire, at the carpet, at the mantelpiece, and at some unknown point of distance – suddenly fixed on Potter. "According to your professor, I have warped and disfigured myself with death and black magic. But he is wrong about me, as usual. This body wrought by the Dark Arts is far more honest than the looks bequeathed to me by my father. I have never been human... I have never felt as others do. I taught myself Legilimency because the actions of those around me made so little sense. Only through our connection have I ever known those emotions you take for granted. And I am *old*, Harry. I shall be seventy this December. Too old to make you the promise you desire. And how unhappy you would be here, without your friends, and with only an insane sorcerer for company. Look at yourself, dear one. I *want* you to stay, my treasure... but I do not trust myself with you. I would hurt you. I *have* hurt you."

It burned his mouth to say such words. But Voldemort was learning, slowly, to open the black well within him and pull out weaknesses to use like knives. The blades cut into his insides as he wrenched them out, but how deeply they embedded themselves in Potter's mind when flung. Amongst so much real confession, what chance did the boy have of spotting the lies? Come Dumbledore's death, Voldemort would simply take Harry. And no one would be able to prevent it, least of all this pathetic boy.

"Oh." It was the only thing Harry could think to say. He deflated visibly, sinking into the chair. He had listened attentively to Voldemort's lengthy speech, hanging on his every word - even if some of it made him feel sick to his stomach, even if Harry wasn't quite sure where the Dark Lord was going with all this - and only for Voldemort to crush his hopes utterly. No, this was *not* how it was supposed to go! Voldemort was supposed to want Harry to stay! Wasn't that the reason they had had such a huge row only two short days ago? Harry's one piece of leverage, and it had been kicked effortlessly from beneath him as though it weighed nothing. Harry was left with his hands empty.

And for what - because Voldemort *cared* about him? Harry's mind spun with the absurdity of this, even as his heart twisted within his chest with something less readily definable (Harry clamped down hard on this, locking it away - so much emotion in one day was nearing painful proportions). Voldemort did not exactly seem the self-sacrificial sort, and this reaction was bewildering. Harry had understood that Voldemort must care about him in *some* strange way, but certainly not to the extent that he would put Harry's health - Harry's happiness! - over his desire to have Harry at his side.

"I would be happier here with you," he said softly, *knowing that they'll be safe and alive*, he added silently. But it was of no use, and Harry knew it. This was a lost cause. What did he - Harry Potter, sixteen-year-old boy, ordinary, unspectacular Gryffindor - have to offer against seventy years of death and destruction to a power-hungry Lord Voldemort? Harry took a deep breath, sadness filling him like a rush of icy water. "I'll have to fight you," he said, green gaze hardening as he tried to look brave in spite of his injury. "If you're going to fight my friends, I'm going to fight back. I won't stand by and watch."

"I very much doubt that the Order of the Phoenix will press you into service at sixteen, Harry." Voldemort hissed, shaking his head a little

as he leaned back in his armchair.

The Dark Lord's left hand fingered the air, splayed like an elegant fan of pale bone. Scarlet eyes observed Potter closely through a veneer of lassitude. *Seldom are the things we desire easily attained. What would you do, Harry, alone in a forest savage, rough, and stern? Where agony and despair conspire to rob you of all hope and the ignominy of death seems a small price to quit such torture. You will never beat me, my treasure.* The lipless mouth gave a bitter smile at having endured what most people confined to metaphor. He felt kinship with the wolf of Dante's poem: malign, ruthless... a being whose greedy will is never sated. Eaten up by hunger.

Why this game when you could take him now? Take him and lock him away in some secret place beyond all reach... "Your friends are children, Harry, as are you. And I shall not be fighting them because the Ministry will have fallen by next summer. This is not a play for the Philosopher's Stone or the prophecy. It is no small thing to be kept from me by destroying the object I seek. I will not harm your companions because they, like you, are irrelevant to the strategy I am employing against Dumbledore and Scrimgeour. I hardly think I shall lay siege to Hogwarts in the near future. Why don't you find out what I ordered Malfoy to do? I would find it so amusing should you expose him. Poor Narcissa."

"I'm not a child," Harry said, anger creeping into his voice. The familiar argument echoed in his thoughts - Mrs Weasley insisting he leave the room at Grimmauld Place, Dumbledore's mouth tightening with another secret he would not share, Sirius' body disappearing behind the shimmering veil

(all for your own good, Harry, not yet, Harry, in time, in time)

But he was tired, and every muscle in his body ached, and he couldn't bring himself to be angry, not truly. Not even with Malfoy, whom Harry loved to hate. The prospect of bringing Malfoy's plans to light would have thrilled him two months ago - two *days ago*. But now that Harry understood the source of those plans - and the futility of them - he couldn't muster even the smallest amount of vindication at Voldemort's suggestion. *You're no better than Malfoy*, Harry's mind whispered, poisonous, horrible words. And he wasn't. Malfoy was nothing more than a frightened boy, botching up half-hearted assassination attempts and at the mercy of forces far beyond his comprehension. Malfoy was not the enemy here. Harry had been

short-sighted to ever think otherwise.

No better. After all, Harry had brought something far more dangerous than a cursed necklace to Hogsmeade that day, and a man had died because of it.

"I've already tried that," he said, looking away unhappily. "Dumbledore didn't believe me." The boy's fingers came up to touch the bandages at his neck. He was suddenly overcome by weariness, too exhausted to figure out what was next or how he should be feeling about any of this. He shifted in his chair, making to stand up, but cringed as his muscles throbbed in protest. "I'll... have to spend the night here. If that's, er, alright with you." He flushed. "I know you don't want me to stay, but I'm not exactly fit to travel."

The ember eyes glowed. Voldemort rose from his armchair in one graceful, almost silent movement. "Of course," the Dark Lord's words were soft. "You are my guest here, Harry." Greed twisted Voldemort's mouth for a moment, before mechanical courtesy smoothed his waxen face once more. It was not prurience which simmered and hissed like Fiendfyre, but the desire to possess utterly this boy whom fate had gifted to Lord Voldemort. A white finger touched the bandages at Harry's neck and the Dark Lord's forked tongue curled in pleasure.

To chastise and reward. Such were the duties of a lord. A voice still grieved for his wand of yew, as eager for blood as a Basilisk, but Voldemort left it to cry in the dark as he stroked Harry's cheek. He would acquire a new wand more powerful than the last. Lord Voldemort would *not* be shattered by wood and feathers. "I do not mean to insult you. At your age I was a Slytherin Prefect busy charming my teachers into letting me sneak books out of the Restricted Section and opening the Chamber of Secrets whenever I had a spare moment. Foolishness which almost caused the Ministry to close Hogwarts."

Lean arms wrapped around Potter as Voldemort gently lifted the boy to his feet and guided him toward silk sheets. "Come to bed, my treasure. I shall deliver you back to school with the owls tomorrow morning." The lipless mouth lingered in the intimate crevices of Potter's ear. The Dark Lord's breath caught for a moment at the warmth of their connection, and his heart railed bitterly against returning his Horcrux to Dumbledore's keeping.

The act of rising from the armchair, such a daunting prospect only a

few moments ago, was made significantly easier by the addition of Voldemort's arms enfolding him, leading him. Harry couldn't help but lean into the warmth Voldemort's mind was offering him - such a contrast to the cool fingers brushing against his hot cheek - and he allowed the Dark Lord without protest to steer him in the direction of the bed. He was just noticing how well Voldemort had cleaned up the mess Harry had made bleeding all over his carpet when soft words and a two-pronged tongue ghosted against the shell of his ear, and a violent shudder abruptly scattered his thoughts (water spilling through cupped fingers).

"You'll need a big owl," Harry said with a shaky laugh. He was torn between the reluctance to ever leave the warmth of Voldemort's arms again and the urge to flee as fast as his injuries would allow him. There was nothing but pain and confusion in this bed, in Voldemort's arms. But his pulse was quickening for reasons he couldn't remember, head spinning, skin trembling and too hot - and instead of running away, Harry only closed his eyes, head dropping forward as he allowed the Dark Lord to bring him to his bed.

Lord Voldemort laughed, jolted out of his possessive ruminations. Perhaps by Harry's silly words, perhaps by that errant piece of soul whispering through Harry things for which words were inadequate. The laughter had an odd quality of surprise and Voldemort's crimson eyes were wide. This pleasure had somehow become lost in dreams and its reality shocked him still. Its light and hypnotic touch upon his senses banished for a moment the avid darkness in which he lived.

He saw again the shard he had seen at Rookwood's house, webbed across Harry's aura, flitting excitedly. The boy's dark lashes drooped and Voldemort's mouth seemed to dart forward on its own accord to kiss the closed lids. He felt giddier than when he had levitated that dead rabbit as a boy. He continued to laugh - shocked and strangely desperate - not knowing whether the hysterical child crying within him was himself or Harry.

He made soft owl noises in between bouts of laughter, lifting his Horcrux onto the bed and continuing to kiss him. Voldemort shuddered and clung tight to Harry's warm flesh. He remembered this weakness and did not know whether to flee or allow his small soul to be lost the maelstrom of its embrace.

He called to Harry and the soul-shard both, beckoning with iron psychic talons more accustomed to maiming and seizing the minds

around him. The call was palsied and weak with disuse, as were the Occlumentic gates, near rusted shut. He wanted them in his mind. He needed them close.

The sound of laughter startled him. Harry's eyes flew open at the touch of a thin mouth against their lids - and then they were rolling across blankets, and Harry's face was being showered with kisses and laughter. "Oh - oh, hey -" said Harry, giggling despite himself as Voldemort hooted softly into his neck, "It - hey - wasn't that funny," but the Dark Lord was still laughing, a sort of hysteria bleeding into the edges of the sound, and Harry wrapped his arms around Voldemort's thin frame before he could stop himself. A shiver ran through the body above him, and Harry held the Dark Lord closer against him. His chest filled with emotion, so huge and overwhelming it was almost painful.

Come in. Voldemort's mind had its arms stretched out wide open to him, and Harry fell into them without a second thought. Even though he'd only truly done this once before outside of their dreams, the shift of consciousness was as natural as falling asleep - or perhaps waking up. The Dark Lord's mind surrounded him, inviting, and Harry sunk into it like a dark cloud, letting Voldemort's mind wrap him in all its giddiness and anger.

For there was, indeed, still anger. It was tucked away in a corner, almost out of sight, but it was still there, terrifying and huge, a furious snake waiting to strike just behind Harry's back. The boy almost pulled away from the Dark Lord's embrace, frightened - but much more powerful than Voldemort's anger was the delight shining through his eyes, his thoughts. Happiness, so fresh that it was almost blindingly bright, that Harry had to squint in the dark bedroom. Harry clung to it, feeding it with his own good-will, feeling Voldemort's joy and the wonder of its novelty course through his body like an electric current.

"Yes," Harry breathed against Voldemort's mouth, stroking the back of his head with soothing touches and holding him closer still. He would not pull away.

Lord Voldemort woke with the sun. No matter how late it was when he lay down to sleep, some forest instinct almost always stirred him at dawn. He felt so wonderfully warm. Yet it was not Nagini's smooth, heavy body coiled beside him, but something mammalian. *Harry.* The

Dark Lord shook his head. They had fallen asleep in their clothes and each other's thoughts. He could see Harry's dreams playing at the edge of his mind. Something about Quidditch and using snakes instead of balls. Voldemort shook his head again: such a thing would be terrifying for serpents and players alike. He pulled away from Harry's mind just as a Slytherin beater hit a particularly large and angry viper towards Potter.

Voldemort wandlessly summoned the boy's glasses and placed them on his nose. The dressings had come loose in the night. Only a small scar remained. Potter put Voldemort in mind of a young, bespectacled hedgehog with his rumpled appearance: black hair sticking up at all angles. The lipless mouth gave a small smile and sharp, milky nails ghosted just shy of Potter's young face. He had thought to wake the boy - a cruel scratch or a gentle pat - but decided against it. The fire was little but a bed of embers, leaving them in darkness, but Voldemort's eyes could make out his sleeping Horcrux perfectly. The boy belonged here, beside him. If only it had not been necessary to send Nagini to another part of the manor. Then he would have awoken with both his precious treasures beside him.

The Dark Lord pulled away from Potter as carefully as he could – sighing inwardly at the heat he left behind – and went to pick the holly and phoenix feather wand from the floor where it had been tossed. It did not hamper his magic, but emitted a steady feeling of rather sulky resistance. Voldemort put it on the dresser while he donned his warmest garments. His hooded cloak, well-lined with sable fur, he left loose around his shoulders as he slid the wand into a deep pocket.

Light was just beginning to pale the blue snow outside when the Dark Lord parted the drapes with a small gesture. The sun was still dim; a smudge of colour edging a line of darkly naked trees on a distant hill. Spidery fingers brushed slowly across the wet pane. The Dark Lord tilted his head in thought. Livid eyes glinted in the almost-dawn.

It was a new day and he needed a new wand.

Icy rain beat hard on Harry's back. He was thirteen, and the Dementors were lurking just outside the pitch, and his glasses were fogging up, despite the spell Hermione had given him. His fingers were numb around his broom handle, and he squinted into rain and wind, searching for a glint of gold, a pair of tiny wings, anything -

Something went hissing and spitting past his head and Harry rolled over on his broom, narrowly avoiding being knocked clean off. His heart jumped into his throat - snakes, all the Quidditch balls had been replaced with snakes, and the field below was full of them, rearing up and hissing for him to lose, to fall. It was just for their own protection, of course, just like the Dementors - to catch the killer, the traitor, Black

(hundreds of Dementors swooping down on the lake and Sirius gasping for breath Sirius staring into the dark hood of a monster Sirius Sirius)

Oi, snake-mouth! a voice called from behind him. Harry whipped around on his broomstick, but he was too late - a huge green snake was already flying toward him, fangs glinting in the rain, eyes yellow and greedy. Nagini (Harry's neck gave a painful sting), it was Nagini, she was going to slam straight into him, she was going to strangle him and bite him and kill him and-

(and in her open yawning mouth was green green light and Sirius Black falling falling through the veil green screaming Sirius arms outstretched dead gone Sirius)

Harry awoke with a great gasp of air, a cry just falling short of escaping his throat - a reflex he'd developed so he wouldn't awaken his dorm mates or, worse, attract Uncle Vernon's booming footsteps. But he wasn't in his dormitory, nor was he in his cupboard. He was sixteen years old, and Sirius was still dead, and Harry had spent the night in Lord Voldemort's bed.

His eyes widened almost comically, and he immediately looked down to make sure that, yes, he was decent. Relief had only just begun to wash over him when Harry noticed the bandages that had unravelled on the blankets while he'd slept. He remembered in a great, dizzying rush exactly what he was doing waking up in Lord Voldemort's bed (pieces of splintered yew in his hands, the great serpent sinking her fangs into his neck) and winced, hand flying instantly up to his throat, inspecting the damage. But his fingers found little evidence that anything out of the ordinary at all had happened to him the previous evening. In fact - and even in spite of his routine nightmares - Harry felt more well-rested than he had since the nightmares (the other kind) had started in his fourth year.

"Ah, my guest is awake..." Voldemort murmured, startling Harry. The Dark Lord stood by the window, already dressed in a thick cloak. His cold voice was commanding in its softness and he did not turn from

gazing through the glass. "I advise you not to linger, Harry. There is an essential task we must perform before I return you to Hogwarts." Voldemort drew Harry's wand. With an elegant flick of holly, the boy's cloak flew from the chair where he had left it last night to land neatly pressed and folded at the end of the bed. "All the better for you, therefore, should you ensure that we accomplish it quickly and without fuss."

Harry stared at the dark figure by the window with wide eyes. Surely Voldemort didn't mean to have Harry tag along? Was this some sort of punishment for last night? He sat up and reluctantly straightened his glasses and slipped on his cloak, his body still warm and slow with sleep. "Um... where exactly are we going?"

Voldemort glided over to the hearth and stirred its dull embers with Harry's wand, causing the fire to crackle back to life. "It is a simple but necessary matter. There is something I need to collect." The Dark Lord waved a hand dismissively, before throwing a pinch of silvery powder into the grate. The flames guttered emerald and spat sparks. Voldemort stepped into the fire and held out pale, spidery fingers impatiently. "Come!"

Well, of all the stupid, thoughtless things Harry had ever done, this couldn't really be the worst, right? Harry allowed himself only a moment to imagine what lay at the other end of the fireplace - a pit of spitting snakes much like the one in his dream that morning flitted briefly across his mind - before he shook himself and rose to his feet. Harry was a Gryffindor. He was not afraid of snakes, or fireplaces, or even Lord Voldemort.

The boy hurried to the hearth, which was already filled with leaping green flames. He slipped inside beside Voldemort - it was a good thing that they were both rather thin, because these things definitely weren't built for two people - and took hold of the Dark Lord's arm, closing his eyes and preparing himself for the ever unpleasant sensation of Flooing.

The name Voldemort cried was almost lost in the roar of the fire -

(as the world ignited and spun on dizzying flames - Voldemort ever its master - the portal harnessed to his will even through this narrow seam of chaotic whirl)

So that he and his Horcrux slid neatly back into reality without a trace of soot or dishevelment.

He could not say the same, however, for Borgin and Burkes. The stone fireplace was in very poor condition indeed, and the dust was so thick it was almost impossible to see anything behind the glass casings. Still, it appeared that the spells he had cast long ago still allowed him to pass freely in and out of the premises, unnoticed by both the proprietors and the Floo Regulation Authority.

The Dark Lord's ophidian nostrils sniffed derisively as he illuminated the dirty shop with wandlight, causing the rusted torture-pieces which decorated the ceiling to glint ominously. "Do you know, it is probable that no one has dusted this place since I quit in 1946. Is it so much to ask that Dark Wizards master basic household charms?"

Harry looked up in surprise at his companion, fears of snake-pits and punishments momentarily forgotten. "You *worked* here?" He was suddenly struck by the image of Tom Riddle fluttering about a shop front in Knockturn Alley with a feather duster, and he had to hide a small smile as he turned to look up at the chains and spikes dangling from the ceiling. "I didn't know you preferred your torture instruments sterile. Isn't that a bit.... counter-productive?"

"When has Lord Voldemort required *implements* in order to torture those who incur his displeasure?" The Dark Lord hissed, irritated at the boy's impudence. The Holly wand began to hum beneath his hand, resisting the tide of Dark Magic rising in Voldemort's fingertips. Pocketing it, he negotiated his way carefully through the shop, stopping for a moment to glance up at the rusted contraptions which had caught Harry's eye.

"Hexed detritus for the most part. The instruments of pitiful wizards who cannot use their wands and vain fools who believe that owning cursed items will make them powerful. Places like this are theatre meant to disguise weakness. The Dark Arts equivalent of all of those protective amulets and trinkets. We are after something far more valuable." Voldemort unlocked the door and stepped into Knockturn Alley.

His breath misted in the grey dawn. The street was deserted. Pristine snow framed a display of shrunken heads in the store window opposite. Voldemort pointed at the window, "There are people who buy those. Yet how many of them have travelled the Marañón and learned the magic of the tsantsa from a Jivaroan shaman? Perhaps they are selling them as Christmas decorations. Ah well. Come, Harry."

He set off towards Diagon Alley, his tall, inky silhouette gliding silently up the street.

Harry gaped at the shrivelled with a mixture of horror and fascination. He tried hard to imagine them adorning a Christmas tree and cringed. He wasn't quite sure whether Voldemort was joking - he sounded a lot like Hermione in lecture-mode whenever he started talking like this, and Hermione *never* joked around when she was lecturing.

But Harry was lingering too long; Voldemort was already halfway up the dark, dingy alley, and Harry did not want to be left alone here. The boy hurried after him, clutching his cloak tighter around his shoulders against the chilly dawn. There was something foreboding about the Dark Lord's movements. Harry wasn't sure whether he was relieved that Voldemort's purpose here today didn't involve stealing Dark torture devices or anxious that they were apparently seeking something 'far more valuable' than the creepiest and most dangerous products Knockturn Alley had to offer.

"You're not going to, er, kill anyone, right?" Harry frowned, shivering in the cold air. His mouth was burning with questions, but he needed to prioritize - especially since Voldemort did not seem particularly patient with him this morning.

The Dark Lord continued walking, not bothering to dignify Potter's fears with an answer. The wandmaker's establishment was quite close to where Knockturn and Diagon intersected. There was a little more life visible in the main street: lights were flickering in the small windows above shops and a few hurried, anonymous figures were to be seen as the sky began to flush with colour. None of them appeared interested in the two cloaked wizards standing at the mouth of Knockturn Alley. Voldemort could almost scent their fear. No amount of Ministry advice posted on walls would save them.

He stopped outside a shabby doorway. Skeletal fingers, as white as the snow which had collected on the narrow steps, traced the faded gold lettering: *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC*. The window had been boarded up. "Now if I were a fearful wand-maker," Voldemort mused quietly as he let himself in, "*where would I hide?*"

The shelves of the tiny shop were bare. Some of them had been knocked over and smashed, doubtless by hopeful looters and then the Ministry. There were no wand-boxes to be seen. But the Dark Lord could sense traces of recent magic. He closed the door behind Harry

and lowered his hood, slitted nostrils dilating at the scent of puissance on the air. "I only come for your ancient art, Ollivander, nothing more. I suggest you do not test Lord Voldemort with a game of hide-and-seek." His high voice echoed coldly in the ruined, empty shop.

Harry had never been particularly fond of Mr. Ollivander, but he certainly did not wish to witness his death at the hand of Lord Voldemort, who had still yet to answer Harry's only and most important question. But Harry clearly had no need to worry. The shop was obviously abandoned, and Mr. Ollivander was safe.

Voldemort, however, seemed to notice something that Harry did not. The boy stared blankly around the room when the Dark Lord's command was met with silence, and then:

"What odd company your wand keeps, Mr Potter..." The wispy voice issued through a crack in the wall that had not seemingly been there before. It slid open and Garrick Ollivander stood trembling where the vanished section of wall had been, wearing a faded dressing-gown and moth-eaten slippers. The wandmaker was stooped and thin. His silvery eyes seemed to pass between Voldemort and Harry with a mixture of fascination and fear. "Phoenix feathers are t-tricky things... yes indeed... not easily tamed. Mmm... I wonder...?"

He turned to Voldemort, his old body stiff with apprehension. The Dark Lord's crimson eyes glittered as he glared at Harry. "Well? Explain to Mr Ollivander why we disturb him at such an hour."

Harry shifted uncomfortably on his feet. If he had been speaking to anyone else, he might have been proud of what he had done - he'd snapped Lord Voldemort's wand, cut off the source of the Dark Lord's power! - but under Mr. Ollivander's scrutinizing, watery gaze, he found his confidence wavering. This man had manufactured the yew and phoenix feather wand himself, after all. "Well, um, we're here because Voldemort needs a new wand, sir," Harry said as casually as he could, as though he went on shopping sprees with Lord Voldemort every sunrise. "Not that he's really told me or anything," he added before he could stop himself, glancing sideways to return the Dark Lord's glare.

"A-a new... new wand..." Ollivander stared owlishly while Voldemort toyed with the idea of punishing Potter for his flippant remarks. But he left the air to dusty silence as Ollivander's words stirred up last night's fury. The wandmaker's pale eyes looked at Potter in confusion.

"The Dark Lord-" Ollivander darted an anxious glance at Voldemort, blinking as though the sight of the serpentine wizard hurt his eyes. "The Dark L-Lord," he tried again, appearing to find some manner of safety in addressing himself to Potter. "Has... has always been h-happy with the wand I made him...?" The bewildered question stuttered out in a pained whimper.

"A slip of yew silver'd in the moon's eclipse..." The whispered words ached with loss; a sibilant hymn to the wand which had chosen him so many years ago: "With you I have bedimmed the noon-tide sun, called forth the mutinous winds and, 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault, set roaring war..." The Dark Lord took a shallow breath. *I am Lord Voldemort, no brittle thing to snap so lightly.* "My wand of yew served me well, Ollivander, but it can do so no longer. It is broken beyond repair." Voldemort was becoming impatient, his voice splintering with threat. He fingered the remains of his once-fine wand, hidden away in a pocket of his robes.

Ollivander did not give an immediate response, simply staring with his sunken, silver eyes, even as his shoulders trembled under Voldemort's harsh gaze. There was an opacity about the wandmaker, the sense of a man obscured by his own craft. "The holly in the windy hedge and round the manor house the yew..." he mumbled hoarsely. "M-may I?" He held out a hand for Potter's wand. Voldemort gave it to him without a word.

"Holly is a great protector," Ollivander said as he turned it over between his fingers. "It is considered a lucky wood by those who set store by such superstitions. Eleven inches, supple... an excellent wand for healing or defensive magic." He paused, holding it tight. "Wands are curious things... curious indeed."

His tear-stained eyes were suddenly bright - almost feverish - with recollection. He now seemed to be focused solely on the boy's wand. "Some of my best work, oh yes. Ah! It misses its brother. Yew, thirteen and a half inches. A rare wood for wand-making. Its branches grow into the ground so that, when the central trunk dies, the yew lives on. A remarkable tree, yew... Christmas wreaths of holly and yew symbolise life eternal. I crafted the two together one winter and paired each with a phoenix feather. How can either live without the other? No, no, you will have to mend it, Mr Potter. If any wand can do the job, it is yours." Ollivander handed the wand back to Potter. "And if any wand possesses the strength to be remade, then that wand is the Dark Lord's."

The wand sang with happiness at Harry's touch, filling his fingers with warmth. The young Gryffindor traced its familiar grooves and imprints with reverence and relief - he had never been so grateful to simply hold it in his hands before. Guilt hit him like a punch to the stomach at this thought. Harry had broken Voldemort's wand for ultimately no good reason, and without a second thought as to how he, Harry, would feel should he ever have to face his holly wand stripped of its magic. Being without it for a few weeks had been horrible enough on its own, never mind the permanence of it being broken forever.

"Mend it," Harry repeated, a soft question, staring down at the lovely, lovely wand in his hands. He was nearly glowing with pride from Mr. Ollivander's kind assessment, but Harry was still uncertain. He had never been very good with charms - that was more Hermione's department - but it was up to him to put this right, according to Mr Ollivander. And besides, perhaps a bit of Harry's magic would do some good for the yew wand that had killed so many. Harry had held it himself the night before, felt its rush of hot, dark power course through his blood, calling out to him. Perhaps the magic in his own wand - a good wand, and for healing, not killing - perhaps it would tame the darkness in the yew, curb its violent nature.

Harry looked up at Voldemort, green eyes full of fiery determination. "Let me fix it," he said, his voice soft and urgent. "You won't need a new wand after all. Do you still have the pieces?"

Voldemort's excitement was tangled in a net of anger and disbelief. His red eyes were wide with shock and the flat nostrils quivered. He did not like to be surprised. He had seen wands broken before and he *knew* that Potter had broken his beyond the point of return. There seemed to be an unspoken conspiracy between Potter and the wand-maker; knowledge passed between them which he, Lord Voldemort, was denied.

He remembered his shock that night in the graveyard, when both their wands hummed with phoenix song. His wand had shrieked in pain as shades had spilt from its tip in ghostly *Priori Incantatem*. They had hissed at him, terrible words of what they had seen. *That he would fail, that the agony of his death - unlike theirs - would not end. That misery eternal would be his...* Envious spirits, nothing more! Of course they would lie. And the ghost of Lily Potter had looked at him with the same mixture of disgust and pity so perfected by Albus Dumbledore. And he, so newly reborn, had trembled.

No book on wand-lore had revealed to the Dark Lord the mystery which had saved Potter that night. It had troubled him, and doubtless he would have spoken to Ollivander earlier had not greater concerns preoccupied his time.

He could not be pleased about his wand. He saw only a deepening mystery he did not understand. Beneath his calm exterior, liquid fury was beginning to pool behind his livid, crimson eyes. "How is it that a not particularly talented schoolboy can perform a piece of magic said to be impossible?" He demanded of Ollivander. "You called our wands brothers. Explain this... *fraternity*. And do not *lie* to Lord Voldemort, wandmaker!" He raised his left hand. The white fingers pulsed with vicious power and the darkness seemed to deepen until all the stricken wandmaker could see were a pair of terrifying scarlet eyes.

Ollivander whimpered and stepped back. He could not even summon the courage to draw his own wand on the unarmed Dark Lord. "Please, I - *I beg you...*"

The air crackled with magic and building rage. The room filled with swirling darkness, and Harry couldn't help but feel grateful that he was, for once, armed against Voldemort's fury. Not that it would do him much good, but the illusion of self-defence was at least slightly more reassuring than facing Lord Voldemort with no weapon at all. Taking a deep, steadying breath, the Gryffindor tightened his grip around his wand and stepped directly between the Dark Lord and the cowering wandmaker.

"Stop." Harry glared up into Voldemort's furious gaze. "You're not *listening* again! Just - calm *down*, all right?" Harry knew he wasn't nearly as intimidated as he should be, but how could he be? He was coming to understand that Voldemort's anger usually surfaced to mask a deeper and wilder range of emotions - in this instance, the fear that coloured Voldemort's panicked thoughts; that lined the sharp, jagged edges of the memories flitting across his mind. Fear of that which he did not understand.

Because Voldemort didn't know. Of course he didn't know - how could he? But it still came as a surprise to Harry, who had privately been haunted by the information whenever he cast a spell. "Mr Ollivander told me in my first year, when my wand chose me. The phoenix feather in my wand is from the same phoenix as the feather in yours. From Fawkes. It's why my - why all of those ghosts came out of your wand after the Triwizard Tournament. They're brothers."

He *hated* it. Why must there always be something he could not foresee, some rare or ancient magic which surfaced to thwart Lord Voldemort? It was fortunate indeed that the Dark Lord had not succeeded in killing Potter, but that cold fact did not leaven his anger.

It explained the phoenix song, but little else. Wand lore had never been a discipline in which the Dark Lord had been particularly interested. An error on his part, perhaps, to overlook such a thing. He fingered the broken pieces of yew in his pocket. He did not want Potter's help. His solitary pride burned with shame. He desperately wished to have his wand returned to him, but he had always balked at relying on anyone but himself. To ask Potter - the lucky, foolish child whose green eyes were glaring up at Voldemort in challenge - for *anything* was more than he could bear.

He glanced at Ollivander and remembered when he had first met the wandmaker. He recalled his secret fear that no wand would want him, just as no parent had wanted him. With each wand he tried, he had made himself want one less and less until he had convinced himself that it was a matter of perfect indifference to him one way or the other. Then his wand of yew had chosen him and his left hand had shook with relief and joy.

There had been joy last night too. Yet another thing he did not understand even as he craved it. Voldemort's lip twisted and he turned away; loathing himself for all those things which Potter seemed to grasp so easily which he struggled to even comprehend. *You remain... forgive me... woefully ignorant.* Had he not travelled the world and steeped himself in magic far beyond the comprehension of common wizards? Yet still - *still* - he found himself at the mercy of his ignorance. Why must Potter's carelessness be forever saved by accidents of fate while he, Lord Voldemort, was fated to see even the best laid plans go awry?

Frustration burned within him as Harry watched Voldemort turn away. The dark walls of the wand shop were swimming with memories, and Harry was having trouble distinguishing between his own and Voldemort's. It made it difficult for Harry to think, to remember to whom the anger bubbling in his chest belonged. Voldemort's emotions churned in his head, drawing some of Harry's most unpleasant memories to the surface of his thoughts.

But Harry forced himself to think past it all. "Listen to me." The boy's

voice was soft as he reached out and touched a thin shoulder, made broad by cloak and robe - but Harry had seen Voldemort without his terrifying Dark Lord ensemble, knew how fragile the bones underneath really were. "It doesn't have to be like this. I know I've botched things up, and I know that this is all my fault. But... if Mr. Ollivander says that I can fix this, then I will. I can. Let me show you." Harry swallowed, his gaze intensifying. "I can show you."

The hand was a strange and unexpected weight on Voldemort's shoulder. It warmed with the power of their connection and seemed to push back the Dark Lord's ever-present anger. And Harry's words - *I can fix it, I can show you* - fell like a sparking flare into dark well of Voldemort's mutilated soul, illuminating the foetal skeletons of still-born emotions which had lain buried in its depths for so long. Breath was knocked from the Dark Lord along with his anger. The ophic nostrils flared as he drew in much-needed air.

Long, white fingers shot out to grasp the boy's cloak and pull him into a fierce kiss. The gleaming, scarlet eyes remained locked on Ollivander in possessive challenge. But the wandmaker did not gasp or fall back in horror. He simply watched with penetrating - almost voyeuristic - curiosity, absently humming a Christmas melody under his breath.

"Very well," the Dark Lord declared in a breathless hiss as he concluded the kiss. He held out the broken pieces of wood, dark splinters against Voldemort's pallid flesh. *Could Potter's wand truly repair such damage?* "You shall have your chance."

In the dull light of Mr Ollivander's shop, Lord Voldemort's wand did not seem like much more than two pieces of a broken twig. A long fissure ran straight from the splintered break to the tip. Bits of red phoenix feather were poking out from where it had been broken, but the feather was frayed, as limp and dead as the rest of the broken wand. Did it even have magic left in it? Harry examined it where it lay in Voldemort's elegant hands. The boy's brow furrowed, his cheeks still flushed and heart racing from their sudden and unexpected kiss.

Was he sure this was the right thing to do? He hadn't accomplished what he'd hoped to by snapping it in the first place - nothing seemed to have changed at all, really. But Harry wasn't going to give up. Not yet. He simply needed to find a way to use this to his advantage. He had already ensured the safety of thousands of children under the age

of seventeen. But Voldemort had been docile and vulnerable at the time of his promise, not furious and shocked. Perhaps, looking back, snapping the Dark Lord's cherished wand really wasn't the best way to put Voldemort in the right sort of mindset for such a conversation.

Harry would find another way. His life seemed to be a long succession of stupid mistakes, stabs in the dark until he, by some stroke of luck, finally got it right. And one thing was for certain: Harry would never get it right this time if he lost Voldemort's trust.

The Gryffindor lifted his own wand and gave an experimental prod at the broken pieces of yew. Nothing happened. Harry shot an anxious look at Mr Ollivander, but the old man offered him no assistance, eyes wide and watery and darting excitedly from Harry's wand to Voldemort's. Harry would have to do this himself, then. Swallowing, he let his wand trail down the length of Voldemort's. The holly seemed to stir beneath his fingertips. It brushed against the phoenix feather poking out the middle, and Harry nearly jerked away when the holly buzzed suddenly at the touch, a pulse of hot electricity up his arm.

"Reparo."

The yew began to glow, illuminating every groove and whorl in the wand's polished surface. The phoenix feather shivered and shook, but for a moment, it did not seem as though anything more was going to happen. And then, to Harry's great astonishment, the wood was mending, sewing itself back together. The strands of Fawkes' feather twirled and entwined, the wood crawled across the rapidly disappearing crack, and all the while Harry's wand trembled beneath his fingers as it cast the spell, the air thickening and swirling with magic. There was a final smattering of green and gold sparks out the tip, and then the wand had sealed, as lovely as it had been before Harry had broken it - save for the smallest scar right in the centre, at the very point where it had been snapped.

Harry looked up at Voldemort then, a grin blossoming across his face. His breath was coming a bit fast - the boy was near-dizzy with relief. "There," he said proudly, unable to stop smiling. "There, now try it out!"

As the pieces of yew sealed themselves together, Voldemort could barely contain his excitement. Manic happiness filled him as he rolled his old wand between his long fingers.. It felt as beautiful as he

remembered, almost as though Harry had just reattached his very hand. The smell of ozone and the echo of phoenix song seemed to hang in the dusty air.

He hardly noticed Potter and Ollivander. A stream of high, mad laughter rang out raw and harsh, and Lord Voldemort began to move with gracie abandon. Bolts of dazzling lightning illuminated his gleeful serpentine features. It was an ecstasy of power and sensation akin to when he had first regained a physical body and performed the magic of which he'd long-dreamed through years of abject formlessness. His wand, like him, had now been reborn and it thrilled, as Voldemort had, at the triumph of existence.

And then it was over. The bottom dropped out of his glee to be replaced by an eagerness to hunt - *to kill* - and baptise this rebirth in blood. The bolts of magic boiled vivid green. And *there* was curious Garrick Ollivander, who now knew far more than he should. The Dark Lord stilled in righteous, predatory anticipation. His forked tongue flicked the air in excitement and his scarlet eyes were blank and terrible. No light was reflected therein, no shade of mercy.

His feral mind tipped over the precipice - as black and horrifying as a Dementor greedy for a kiss. Insane. Happiness evaporated, leaving Voldemort nothing but broken darkness in its wake.

That certainly wasn't what he'd meant. Harry braced himself as the room went cold, preparing to face whatever fury Voldemort wished to unleash upon his disobedient Horcrux - before he realized that the Dark Lord's burning, pitiless gaze was levelled not on Harry, but on Mr Ollivander.

Harry was between them in the blink of an eye, wand raised at his side, heart pounding like a timpani. Anger balled unpleasantly in his chest - what the hell did Harry need to do to get through to him? He'd repaired the man's wand the day after the Dark Lord had nearly killed him, and this was how Voldemort meant to thank him? But Harry swallowed his impatience, remembering the terror that had flashed across Voldemort's eyes the night before as he'd spoken of his own madness. *He doesn't mean it.*

"Voldemort." His voice was even and stern, a tone he might use to coax a wild beast away from a group of children. He approached the Dark Lord slowly. "You have your wand again. It's time for us to leave." He gave a tentative prod at Voldemort's mind with his own and

found his consciousness violently thrown back. Harry drew in a sharp breath, scowling and trying desperately to smother his own flaring temper for Mr Ollivander's sake. "Let's go."

Someone was in his way. Voldemort raised his wand to swat the creature out of his path, but something about its voice stopped him. He looked down. For a moment the scarlet eyes were unseeing, void of connection. Then Voldemort blinked. "Harry...?" The soft voice was coldly surprised. His wand arm fell to his side. A panicked thought tentatively reached for Harry's mind; a wretched blind thing groping in the dark for the only person who had ever held it.

Harry could feel Voldemort's mind brushing against his own searchingly, a plea. And for the briefest of moments, Harry was taken up with the bitter urge to push the Dark Lord away. He remembered the painful kick Voldemort had given his spirit the day before on the stairs, the sensation of (*nausea pain death*) fangs piercing his throat while Voldemort laughed and celebrated, and Harry's eyes hardened. Let Voldemort know what it is to be alone, to be rejected and hurt.

But then Harry saw the Dark Lord's eyes - wide and childlike, full of fear and confusion - and his anger dissipated along with his poorly constructed mental walls. Lord Voldemort knew better than anyone what loneliness was, and Harry could not afford to forget that, no matter the number of violent outbursts. The boy closed the distance between them, cradling Voldemort's mind much like he cradled the piece of Voldemort's soul within his own.

"Yes, it's me, it's Harry." Harry grasped the Dark Lord's shoulders and tried for a soothing smile. "You all right? You gave me a scare for a minute there." A weak laugh. "C'mon, we should - er - let Mr Ollivander get back to work. He was very nice to help us out, wasn't he?"

Voldemort stared at his Horcrux for a long moment, arching into the psychic warmth of Harry's mind. No emotion showed on his mask-like face as he found the image of himself in Potter's thoughts - a demented, vicious creature with a face whiter than a skull - and did not know whether to exult at the fear he inspired or baulk at the madness so terrifyingly evident in those crimson eyes.

You gave me a scare for a minute there. The lipless mouth gave a taut smile at the boy's ludicrous statement. "Ah, Harry, but I must scare

you upon occasion. Otherwise how can you be certain it is truly I?" It was a feeble quip, but Voldemort could hardly speak, his thoughts clotted by fragile emotions he did not wish to shatter.

The Dark Lord took a breath and then glanced across at the wandmaker. "I have much to thank you for, it seems. You have Lord Voldemort's gratitude, Ollivander." His soft voice gave no hint of thanks. "Should a soul hear of this, my servants shall hang the Dark Mark above the bodies of your family. I am a merciful lord. Do not abuse my good graces."

"My Lord," Ollivander shook his head helplessly as he stared at the two embraced wizards, "were I to even attempt to describe the events of the last half hour to anyone, they would think me madder than Xenophilius Lovegood."

"What he *means*," said Harry, who was barely able to restrain an eyeroll, "is that he's very happy to have his wand back, and that he appreciates your help very much, sir." He slipped his hand into Voldemort's own, sliding his fingers between the long, spidery digits of the Dark Lord's. The connection pulsed and soothed. *Don't worry, sir, you're just as sane as I am*, Harry thought but did not say as he was reminded of Xenophilius Lovegood's equally quirky daughter. Near-hysterical laughter threatened to escape his lips at the thought of how ridiculous his life had become, and Harry tugged his hood over his head and Lord Voldemort out the door before the Dark Lord could change his mind about Mr Ollivander's fate.

The sun was hovering above the tops of the buildings now, morning light spilling across the empty street. But Harry did not want to take any chances, and he pulled Voldemort into a shadowy alleyway beside Mr Ollivander's shop. When he was sure they were out of sight, the young man wrapped his arms around Voldemort, holding him close - as though he could force the Dark Lord to stay this way if he held him still enough, keep him from transforming into a bloodthirsty monster with the cage of his arms. "You're impossible," he mumbled into Voldemort's shoulder, eyes closing.

"*I am*." Voldemort concurred with quiet, melancholy pride, leaning down to bury his gaunt, flat face in his Horcrux's black hair.

"It's okay. How else would I know that it's you?" He breathed in deeply against the Dark Lord's neck, pressing a kiss to his pale throat. He suddenly was not looking forward to going back to school, where he

would have to go back to pretending that this wonderful-terrible thing between them didn't exist, that he wanted to kill the broken, complicated creature in his arms. "Thank you for... erm, y'know. Not killing him."

Voldemort gave a brusque nod. He obviously didn't want to discuss the wandmaker. "It is time we should be gone, my treasure, ere your friends discover your absence." But the Dark Lord did not relinquish his hold on Harry. Instead, he tightened his grip possessively.

"Yeah." Harry sighed, burrowing his face deeper into Voldemort's shoulder. He didn't make an attempt to pull away - but that was only because it was very cold out here, he told himself, and he felt so warm and safe cocooned in Voldemort's aura. But in that moment, in the most secret, darkest parts of his thoughts, Harry could truly imagine giving himself up to Lord Voldemort. Sacrificing his life and future in return for the wizarding world's safety.

But Voldemort didn't want him - he had so said himself. Harry closed his eyes against the bitter sting of rejection. "I did really want to stay, you know," he whispered into the Dark Lord's neck, the words pulled from his heart before he could stop himself.

"How can you think that I do not wish for you to remain?" Voldemort's half-hissed, angry words were urgent with longing. "I suffer your absence because when and if you come to me, it will not be as a child stealing yourself away from school while your friends slumber!"

Harry tore himself away from the Dark Lord's embrace. The harsh, winter air descended on him like a freezing blanket, and Harry wrapped his arms around himself, face hot with anger as he tried and failed to rein in his temper. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides, because if they didn't, he felt he might seize Voldemort's robes and shake him in frustration. "*I'm not a child!*" he exclaimed, voice rising. "And I - god - I know what I want, alright? Why is it that *everyone* thinks they know what I want better than I do?" He exhaled furiously, his breath misting in the air, as he tried to get his voice back down to a reasonable level. "You're not a monster. I've seen what you are, from every angle. I've - I've been inside your head! I know what you are, and it isn't," he gestured wildly at the shop building beside them, "it isn't that, all right? It isn't, and I just, I just wish..."

Voldemort tilted his head at Harry like a curious child. He looked calm but Harry could feel the anger building in the Dark Lord's mind.

"Would you truly elope with me now and flee Hogwarts to disappear with the wizard who murdered your parents? Our fortunes are inextricably linked, Harry, but nowhere is it written that you must commit such sacrifice. I know that my presence grows wearisome for those unfortunates forced to endure it over-long. Even the most devoted quickly offer up little but pitiful excuses to desert their lord's company. Do you imagine I would relish being a trial to be endured in order to satisfy your principles?"

Harry grit his teeth, stung by the reminder of his parents. He faltered and looked away unhappily, unable to meet the Dark Lord's gaze. He hated himself for how cold he was, how much he longed to return to Voldemort's arms. "Yes. The answer is yes. If I could - help you, if I could do - Merlin, I don't know - anything at all. I would do it. It would be worth it to me." He looked up, hands shaking with his frustration. "I can't kill you. And I can't fight you, or my - my friends. I can't sit back and watch you at each other's throats. I need to do *something*." Harry drew a deep breath, his pulse racing and his eyes full of emotion as he stared at the wizard who would have been his murderer. "And I - I want to. I just want to. Can't you understand that?"

"No..." Voldemort whispered, his soft voice almost lost. "No I..." He simply did not know what to do with Potter's fierce declarations. They flawed him, robbed him of his manipulations, and rendered him helpless with surprise. He took an instinctual step toward his Horcrux and then paused and bit his thin lip. The long, clawed fingers halted short of Potter's cloak. It was the Dark Lord who seemed like a starved snake-child at that moment, with a child's hungry wonder in his wide, red stare.

Voldemort's fingers brushed his cloak, and Harry suddenly could no longer stand the distance between their mouths. He'd never been the one to initiate any of their kisses, and so he simply took one, pressing his mouth to Voldemort's thin lips with desperate, almost bruising force. He pulled away just as suddenly, hands fisted in the Dark Lord's robes. He thought his heart might burst straight out of its ribcage.

"Please," Harry said, and he was shaking, shaking himself into a million pieces in the winter wind. "You *have* to understand. I don't -" His voice broke, and he knew he was rambling, but he couldn't stop the words from coming out or else he might reach up and press kisses against that thin mouth again and that was only making things more

confusing instead of better, he was sure of it. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore. But this is the only thing that - that really feels right, and I think if you just let me, I could - please, let me show you." His chest, his teeth were aching with it. "It doesn't have to be this way."

The Dark Lord was mesmerised. Voldemort could hardly make out the meaning of the boy's frustrated, disordered speech. Yet Potter's aura was crackling with the promise of something Tom Riddle had never dreamed would be his. *I can show you*. He was hypnotised, greedy with longing for he knew not what. "Show me..." he breathlessly demanded, trembling with desire. "Show me *everything*. I want... I *must* know..." He seized Harry's chin, forcing him to meet the wild, livid gaze.

The breath rushed out of Harry's lungs in his surprise. It took a few moments for him to process that - yes, Voldemort was saying *yes*. By the time he understood what he was hearing - *yes, yes*, - Harry was grinning foolishly, unable to keep himself from smiling. "Everything," he agreed in a rush of air. He felt giddy with triumph. *If any wand can do the job, Mr. Potter, it's yours*. Harry could do this. He could show Voldemort happiness, true happiness, more than fleeting moments in the dreams they shared - and, by doing so, he could help him. He could do this.

"I'll show you everything," Harry promised against the Dark Lord's mouth, "everything there is to know. You won't regret this, I swear." He slid his hands to the back of Voldemort's head, cradling his skull, pulling him down for kiss after kiss. He never wanted to stop.

And suddenly their flesh was mingling and everything else fell away. Voldemort hardly knew what it was to which he had agreed, except that Harry had hold of him and was busy covering the Dark Lord in kisses. But all of it paled in comparison to the rampant joy so vivid it seemed to *burn* into Voldemort with every touch of his Horcrux's lips. He gasped under the weight of Potter's emotions. He had forgotten how unequal a partner he was in this raw connection; at the mercy of a shard of his own partite soul allied to the whole of Harry's shining aura.

"Do-" he fought to speak through Harry's eager mouth and the overwhelming magic of their connection. "Do you even have a plan?" It was less an insult and more a dizzy half-laugh.

Harry struggled to look offended through his smile, which still stretched from ear to ear. He was standing on his tip-toes at this point, trying to kiss every bit of Voldemort's face that was available to him. "I *always* have a plan!" he protested, hiding his grin against Voldemort's ear. "They just, er, they don't always go the way I think they will." Harry leaned back, and as he took in the happiness on Voldemort's face, he couldn't help but kiss the smile on the Dark Lord's mouth, entreating it to stay. "But perhaps we could ditch the alleyway. While we're, um, sticking to my plan."

"And where shall your plan take us, my treasure?" Voldemort asked, infected with the same heedless spirit, crimson eyes glittering with pleasure. "To Scotland to collect your things? Malfoy Manor? Rookwood's empty home? Surrey? Or perhaps we shall flee to the Orient or South America?"

"Away," Harry replied, voice suddenly soft and serious. The morning light was beginning to spill into their alley; it chased the shadows from the Dark Lord's face. "As far away as you can take us. Away from Dumbledore, and your Death Eaters - from all of this. Somewhere they can't touch us."

"Then I must return to the Malfoys' home to pack for our journey. I cannot leave without Nagini." He grasped Potter tightly and slid his wand through the air with the delicious pleasure of reunion -

(spinning, spinning - within and without - through the ever contracting void until)

He held Harry close in the outskirts of snow-covered Hogsmeade, white flakes falling against the blackness of their cloaks. "You will meet me this evening, after dinner, in the Chamber of Secrets. Is that acceptable?"

"Alright," Harry said, but his happiness was hampered by the shiver of fear that chased itself down his spine. The last time he had been in the Chamber of Secrets, he had been fighting for his life against Lord Voldemort and a bloodthirsty basilisk. But there was no chance of anyone finding them down there, and it was a lot easier for Harry to slip off to the second floor than find a plausible excuse to leave the castle again.

Brushing off his anxiety, Harry leaned into Voldemort's embrace, a sigh misting over the Dark Lord's shoulder in the freezing air. "Thank you," he whispered into Voldemort's ear, excitement still dancing

across his nerves. He gave Voldemort another kiss, and then one more, slower than the others. By the time he pulled away, Harry was feeling rather breathless. "I'll be there by seven, then."

"Very well." Voldemort took one last, wondering glance at his astonishing Horcrux. He thought for a moment to dispense with this short parting altogether, but he knew that he needed time to prepare for this journey without Harry. Time to call his Death Eaters and instruct them how to proceed in his absence. Besides, the boy would surely enjoy saying farewell to his schoolfellows.

And what could befall *this* boy? Fortune would not harm her favoured child. Harry was a dishevelled, radiant creature, beaming from ear to ear at the Dark Lord. Voldemort took another kiss, lingering in its wet warmth and the excitement sparking between them.

And then he was gone with a crack and a sizzling whirl of power, leaving Harry Potter behind in the bleak outskirts of Hogsmeade.

For a short time, Harry only stood there, shivering in the cool morning and looking up at the brightening sky. He had won. *They were leaving.* Sure, Harry had nearly died in the process, but he had gotten his way, even if only indirectly. For he had faith in himself - and in Voldemort - to figure this out and make things right. If Voldemort was happy enough all the time, Harry thought hopefully as he stood alone in the snow, perhaps he would never want to kill again.

But there was much to be done before this could happen, starting with Ron and Hermione. His stomach clenched into a knot at the thought of them - he *was* abandoning them, after all - but he soothed it over with the thought of their families and their futures. It was for their own good. But he couldn't simply leave without saying goodbye. As Harry made his way to Honeydukes, he mulled over how he should broach the subject of his departure, if at all.

"*Alohomora*," Harry whispered when he reached the sweetshop, and his lovely holly wand performed the spell without protest, unlocking the door to Honeydukes with a soft *click*. The Gryffindor slipped inside, locking the door behind him, and quickly made his way to the basement, where he knew the secret passage back into the school was hidden behind the dusty boxes and crates. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his father's cloak, not allowing himself to linger on the painful thought that this was the last time he'd be sneaking back into Hogwarts. With the smallest of sighs (*it's for the best, Harry, you can do*

this, Harry), the boy opened up the trap door in the corner, and vanished inside.

After a long walk, Harry reached the end of the tunnel. But as the hump of the statue scraped open and Harry moved to climb out, a coldly triumphant voice spoke: "Accio Potter's invisibility cloak." Harry stared in white-faced horror, mind racing for an explanation. He had conjured a hundred scenarios from the space between the Honeydukes trap door and the statue of the one-eyed witch, each more horrible than the next, all of which involved Dumbledore discovering him on his way back to the common room. It seemed, however, that his anxieties had been focused on entirely the wrong person.

It was Snape.

There was no snow here. Just chill wind and a frost which lay thick across the grass. Voldemort pulled the hood of his cloak over his head to shield his sensitive red eyes from the sunlight. He would never again see this place as he remembered it in dreams. The brilliant colours of a dying summer. Even winter light hurt his eyes which, over the years, had slowly developed photophobia. His crimson irises took in far more light than the human eye, granting the Dark Lord superior night vision. The slit pupils gave him greater focus in the darkness and their small size made the daylight just bearable. His followers thought that Voldemort preferred meeting in shadow due to some romantic association between the Dark Arts and darkness, but the truth was that he was at a disadvantage otherwise.

It had been terrifying when his physiognomy first began to change. When his eyes started to leak blood and his skin itched painfully as its texture morphed and the pigment slowly vanished. The fear of simply *not knowing* where his metamorphosis would end.

Everything was blindingly bright here. The edges of things blurred into each other. But he needed to think and some stray thought had brought Lord Voldemort to this desolate hilltop where his father's crumbling, ivy-covered house stood empty. He lowered his eyelids against the glare and allowed dream and memory to mingle: Potter standing amongst yellow flowers. Tom Riddle walking up a dusty lane holding his uncle's wand. That dizzying moment when he had realised that Harry was the Horcrux to which he had clung.

What strange destiny stalked Tom Riddle's life. For here, he was Tom. Alone and unsure. He stared at the yew wand in his left hand, stroking

where the wood had been scarred. Something inside him broke. A soft, involuntary cry escaped into the cold air. For this was a metamorphosis infinitely more uncertain than any physical transformation.

You're not a monster. I've seen what you are, from every angle. I've - I've been inside your head! I know what you are, and it isn't that, alright? If I could - help you, if I could do - god, I don't know - anything at all. I would do it. It would be worth it to me. Tom's chest was agonisingly tight and his tall body swayed. Sincerity had shone out of those emerald eyes. *You're hurt*, Harry had held him and not been revolted. Harry did not think him monstrous. Harry had seen the madness that painted the inside of Tom's mind and had only held him all the tighter.

The Dark Lord straightened. This would work to his advantage. He would summon his Death Eaters and command them to proceed by covert means during his absence on some great task. Meanwhile, Harry would cure him. Harry would atone by mending what thirteen years of exile had shattered. Then, once restored to that acuity of mind which had made him so powerful, Lord Voldemort would return to rule Wizarding Britain with his Horcrux by his side.

Part VIII

The third-floor corridor was deserted at such an early hour. Classes had not yet started, but Weasley had confirmed to the staff that Potter was not in the Gryffindor tower. In fact, no one seemed to have any idea where Potter was - including the Headmaster. Footsteps sounded on the stone floor, halting before the statue of the one-eyed crone. Potter had last been sighted late yesterday evening by Longbottom in the Gryffindor Common Room.

Professor Dumbledore seemed fairly certain, however, that Potter would return. Therefore - assuming one trusted the Headmaster's hypothesis that the arrogant boy would soon return from wherever his nightly extra-mural jaunt had taken him - it was simply a case of when and where.

The walls and grounds of the school were now regularly patrolled by both teachers and aurors, in addition to the security provided by many spells and charms. Potter had neither the skill nor the wit to trick his way through such enchantments. In order to sneak back into the school, he would have to use one of the secret passages. At first the passage from the Shrieking Shack seemed the obvious choice, but even an invisibility cloak would not solve the problem of getting past the great oaken doors which had been layered in all manner of wards by Professor Flitwick.

And then it came to him: *Potter suddenly appearing out of nowhere on the third floor, sweaty and breathless, with his pockets filled with Hogsmeade purchases and his mind filled with flashes of a dark, stone passage.*

There had been no sleep since Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger had reported Potter missing. When the Headmaster had finally ordered him to call off the search of the grounds, he had simply lain in wait like a spider who has fixed his web. *I will not fail you, Lily. I will not.*

The hump of the statue began to scrape open and a coldly triumphant voice spoke: "Accio Potter's invisibility cloak."

Professor Severus Snape caught the cloak and folded it neatly over his arm. "So..." His face was rigid and his black eyes flashed dangerously as he glared into the boy's shocked and guilty face. *Let Potter attempt to lie his way out of this one.* "Once again famous Harry Potter proves his

utter contempt for the rules. A late night tryst with a fan, perhaps?"

"I don't have any *trysts*," Potter snapped, and then a curious flush rose to his cheeks. "I was – sleepwalking."

"Sleepwalking," the professor repeated slowly. "I see." He allowed a moment for the pathetic lie to hang in the air as he looked Potter up and down. "How fortunate that - while sleeping - you dressed yourself in your warmest clothes and thought to cover yourself with your cloak." Snape's thin mouth stretched into a horrible smile as his dark eyes bored into Potter's. "Do you know what I think, Potter? I think that you are a liar."

"Well you'd know all about those, wouldn't you, *Professor*," Potter snarled. "Or am I supposed to believe you've no idea what your favourite student's been up to all term?"

"Of course I know, Potter," Snape answered softly, his voice filled with barely suppressed fury. "But you see, when *I* sneak out of the castle to visit the Dark Lord, I have to report it to the Headmaster. Otherwise... it doesn't look so good, does it?"

Potter's face paled. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I – with all due respect - why would I go *looking* for Voldemort?"

"I don't know, Potter." Professor Snape said in an eerie imitation of Potter's routine *I don't know, sir*. "What could possibly have *possessed* you to seek out the Dark Lord?" He took a sharp intake of breath, trying and failing to contain his anger. "The Headmaster has always been too lenient with you. Time and again your flagrant rule-breaking has gone unpunished. Sneaking out of Hogwarts at all hours, destroying a valuable Whomping Willow, thievery, cheating, pranks at Mr Malfoy's expense, and even aiding a known felon in escaping the Dementor's Kiss. Professor Dumbledore has allowed it *all* with little but a wave of the hand and a twinkle in his eye. But there is one thing you will find - *one thing* - about which the Headmaster has *very little sense of humour*."

Snape's face twisted and spit flew from his mouth as he seized Potter by the scruff of the neck and hauled him out of the secret passage and onto the stone floor. Snape loomed above Potter, angrier than anyone had ever seen him. "DRACO MALFOY'S PARENTS WILL DIE IF HE DOES NOT CARRY OUT THE WILL OF THE DARK LORD! HOW *DARE* YOU INSULT HIM WHILE BETRAYING THE MEMORY OF YOUR MOTHER!"

"My mother?" Potter shoved him away, fury clearly battling for control across his features. "My *mother* -? Where do you get off – where do you think - *my parents are already dead!* The Malfoys already *had* their chance! I didn't choose this! *My parents* didn't choose this! While you're busy wiping Draco Malfoy's nose, I'm expected to go and kill the most *powerful Dark wizard in living memory!* And you think that you can just – that I would really want to – well, let me tell *you* something, Snape, you have *no right* to talk about my –

"I HAVE EVERY RIGHT!" Snape bellowed back at Potter. "LILY WAS THE MOST TALENTED, BEAUTIFUL WITCH IN THE WORLD! AND SHE COULD HAVE LIVED! HE ASKED HER TO STAND ASIDE, HE OFFERED HER THE CHANCE BECAUSE I *BEGGED* HIM TO SPARE HER LIFE! BUT LILY... LILY *WOULDN'T*-" His voice broke, appalled at the emotion choking his throat; the secrets he had kept for so long rising to the surface with his rage at the foolishness of this boy he had sworn to protect. Then he bared his crooked, yellow teeth and his quiet voice dripped with poison while his dark eyes shone with near-demented rage. "*If only she'd known what a conceited, traitorous brat James' son would turn out to be...*"

Potter let out a roar like a wounded animal, and then he hurled himself at Snape. They both went crashing into the stone wall, Snape's shoulders throbbing at the collision. Potter's wand lay forgotten on the ground as he beat at Snape's chest, clawed at his face. Potter had never looked so angry.

And then Potter was thrown backward in a great burst of light, sliding across the floor. The boy looked furiously around the corridor, breathing heavily - but the anger froze in his face when his gaze settled upon Albus Dumbledore, wand trained on his student, his expression full of both anger and extreme disappointment.

There was never so final a sound as the one the headmaster's door made as Dumbledore closed it behind them.

"Have a seat."

Even if Harry hadn't been terrified out of his mind, there was no room in Dumbledore's voice for argument. Harry sat and watched as Dumbledore offered and Snape refused medical treatment. A bruise was blossoming on one sallow cheek, and there was blood on his face that Harry didn't want to think about, but Snape seemed as though he wouldn't miss this conversation for the world. He had probably been

waiting for this moment since Harry had first set foot in the Great Hall five years ago - the inevitable expulsion of the Boy Who Lived, inherent troublemaker, as arrogant and impossible as his father.

But for once, Harry wasn't worried about being expelled. In fact, he was much more concerned Dumbledore would never let him out of this office again.

The headmaster walked around his desk. Gone was the weary old man of the past few weeks; Dumbledore had never looked more alive – or more furious. "Your disappearance caused quite the panic last night, Harry. Your friends in particular were extremely upset."

Harry swallowed and looked at his lap as an unexpected wave of guilt crashed over him.

"Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger came forward with some very interesting information," Dumbledore continued when Harry said nothing. "You must not be angry with them, Harry; they were, like everyone else, afraid that your life might have been in terrible danger."

Harry's heart nearly stopped in his chest. What could Hermione and Ron possibly have told Dumbledore that would have been of any use? Harry hadn't told them anything - he'd been very careful not to, they would have never understood, none of them would - and then Dumbledore picked a book up off his desk, and Harry went cold with shock.

"I've never seen that book before," Harry blurted out, but he was sure all the colour had drained from his face. Dumbledore was holding Tom Riddle's copy of *Dream Warrior*, which had been hidden safely beneath Harry's pillow. Harry's pillow, which had been empty of Harry's head to protect it last night.

Dumbledore's brow wrinkled. "I would be inclined to believe you, of course - stranger things have cropped up under pillows in this castle than old library books - but Miss Granger claims she helped you search the Hogwarts library for a book with this name only a few weeks ago." He frowned. "And then there's the matter of the rather curious letter tucked inside the cover."

Harry was starting to feel dizzy with fright. He simply could not think of anything to say - what excuse was there for hiding Tom Riddle's book beneath his pillow, with a letter in Lord Voldemort's own hand?

Dumbledore, who must have noticed the guilt written across Harry's face, sighed and leaned forward on his desk. His eyes were filled with sadness. "I cannot allow this to continue, Harry."

"But sir," Harry said, hating the plea in his voice. "You don't understand. I think that I can - that I can stop the war. He's - different when I'm around."

"Have you forgotten so quickly the injuries you suffered when you last decided to confront him on your own?" Dumbledore's blue eyes flashed angrily. "I see the mark on your neck, Harry - do you truly believe that he has changed?"

"He healed it!" Harry said. His hand rose unconsciously to the twin puncture wounds on his throat. He had to force himself not to rise from his chair. "You don't understand - I'm helping him! And I think that if I could just - if I could spend a little more time with him, maybe, if I could - talk to him, be around him - I could make things different!"

"Lord Voldemort's power to manipulate others is beyond your imagination! You must *listen* to me, dear boy - he is trying to win your trust! As soon as he has you under his control, he will hide you somewhere so far from the light of day that you will never see another human face again! You will be forced to watch from a cage while he bathes Britain in blood! He cares nothing for the wonderful, brave young man that you are, Harry - only the piece of his soul that lies in your scar!"

"*That's not true!*" Harry shouted, even though he wasn't quite sure he believed it himself. "No one has ever - no one's tried to help him before, and he listens to me! I can help him! What aren't you understanding about this?"

"He is beyond salvation, Harry!"

"HE IS NOT!"

A sudden furious hiss from the other side of the room made both of them look up. Harry had risen to his feet over the course of the argument; he was breathing almost as heavily as he had been while shouting at Snape, and his heart was surely going just as fast. Dumbledore looked equally distracted; the expression on his face was almost painful to behold for how upset Harry was making him.

It was Snape. He was doubled over, right hand clamped in a white-

knuckled grip over his left forearm, white face screwed up in pain. Harry could only stare in a sort of horrified fascination as Voldemort's call to arms did its very painful work. When he straightened up again, Harry could not read the expression in his hard, flinty eyes as they looked up to meet Dumbledore's. Some sort of silent conversation seemed to pass between them.

"You are sure, Severus?" Dumbledore said finally. He suddenly looked very tired again.

"Yes," said Snape.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and opened them. "Then you must leave at once."

Snape turned on his heel, his robes still billowing behind him despite his injury, and left.

The room was shuttered. There was no light but for a few candles illuminating an elaborate throne-like chair. Nagini coiled across the seat, her dark green scales sliding smoothly across its stone carvings. A spidery, alabaster hand brushed across the back of the chair, entering the circle of candlelight only to vanish again into the darkness. Voldemort rolled his wand impatiently between his fingers as he paced beyond the reach of the guttering flames.

As his servants arrived, their human gazes were drawn to the light. Masked and cloaked, his Death Eaters were pulled together in the centre of the room by some unerring instinct. Voldemort stepped into the dim light and accepted their crawling, murmured obeisance to a darker force than they. Their Dark Lord out of legend. The Heir of Salazar Slytherin. Muffled bodies shuddered with fear and awe. "Master... master..." The eye-holes of their masks darted up to gaze upon the white, inhuman face of their lord; fascinated by his otherness as much as it frightened them. Voldemort gestured with his right hand and they retreated into a kneeling semi-circle around the throne.

"I have called you here to announce that Lord Voldemort has gained the loyalty of the Azkaban Dementors." The Dark Lord's words were a quiet susurrus as he stepped from the light to prowl behind his servants. "Those imprisoned shall be returned to us ere long. However, it would be a shame indeed to waste the advantage Scrimgeour has given us by insisting that his Ministry remains strong. You, my servants, shall take apart this so-called strength from the inside and for this - in glorious service to their lord - those imprisoned must

wait."

Crimson eyes glittered from the darkness. "The aurors know what tactics I used to gain power last time. It was terror which brought the Ministry to its knees. I am told that new aurors are now required to *study* the history of my ascent. However, my Death Eaters and I are not history - we are very much *the future!*" The Dark Lord paused for the loud cries of assent from around the room.

"Ah, Bella..." Voldemort crooned silkily to his faithful Lestrage, touching her shoulder with a single finger. She sighed at the contact, straightening her body. "You shall head the diversion. You will be responsible for keeping the aurors distracted. Lead them on a merry chase. Take Amicus and Aleto with you. You may involve others, but I want no more than three or four of my Death Eaters involved in such activities at any one time. I desire to give the Ministry the impression they are winning, do you understand? Chaos, as though my forces were in disarray. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth, but it is not yet the time to show our strength."

Lestrage's lashes fluttered, her dark eyes shining beneath heavy lids. "It is an honour to serve you, my Lord."

Silk whispered across stone. "Yaxley and Runcorn, you shall have charge of infiltrating Scrimgeour's administration while they focus on Lestrage."

"I am honoured, Master."

"Thank you, my Lord."

The Dark Lord stepped back into the circle. "Severus..."

"My Lord?"

Voldemort stared thoughtfully into the dark eyes visible through the mask. "What have you to report of Dumbledore's Order?"

"They are... concerned for Potter, my Lord." Snape's voice was oddly thick.

"Oh?" The scarlet eyes narrowed with cruel amusement and several Death Eaters tittered. *What have they discovered? Have you been rash, my precious one?*

"They fear your influence on the boy's mind, my Lord. Your ability to

possess him. Apparently, he has been practicing restricted magic. Dumbledore is not pleased."

Voldemort scrutinised Snape's mind carefully, but found no evidence of deceit. "How unfortunate. Had Potter only asked, I would have been delighted to educate him on the finer points of the Cruciatus Curse." This, predictably, instigated a great deal of mirth. "*Silence.*" He glided past Severus Snape to seat himself on the throne. "I shall be much abroad in the coming days. There is a vital task I must undertake alone. My displeasure upon my return - should I discover that any one of you has failed in the duties which Lord Voldemort has seen fit to bestow upon you - shall be *immense*..."

There were a few long moments of silence after Snape left. Harry did not sit back down, but tension was still coiled tight in his chest, only having been exacerbated by Snape's mysterious disappearance. He couldn't help but wonder what Voldemort was summoning his Death Eaters for. Could this have to do with their journey? Was it some sort of trap?

"You seem concerned," Dumbledore said quietly, breaking Harry's train of thought. He was studying Harry intensely from behind his spectacles. Harry had to fight not to look away. "Do you not trust this man to whom you wish to hand over your life?"

Harry's eyes narrowed in a glare. His suspicion vanished with his sudden, urgent need to defend Voldemort. "He's given me more reason to trust him than you have. He doesn't keep anything from me. He doesn't lie to me."

Dumbledore's face crumpled for a moment in pain; it made Harry's chest hurt to look at, but damnit, Harry *had* to do this. Dumbledore had to understand. "Your friends have expressed fear that Lord Voldemort has bewitched you," his headmaster said sadly. "But they - like you - do not understand that manipulation can be many times more powerful than any sort of magic."

"He hasn't bewitched me," Harry said, and he was proud of how level he was able to keep his voice. "And he isn't manipulating me, either. I'm sorry, Professor, but I've already made up my mind. You have to understand. I need to do this."

Dumbledore sighed. His eyes were filled with the same pity they had offered Voldemort when the Dark Lord had come calling for his locket those many weeks ago. "Then you must understand that I cannot let

you go through with this, my dear boy." He drew his wand, and Harry's stomach gave a horrible lurch. "Forgive me, Harry. I have failed you. Perhaps one day, when this is all over, you will understand why this was necessary."

Harry stumbled backward, heart *poundingpoundingpounding*, his fingers groping uselessly for his wand. "I - sir - I don't know what you mean."

"You will," Dumbledore said, and the door's soft click as it locked behind Harry was the loudest sound he had ever heard. "And when that day comes, you will thank me."

There was a sound like a rushing train, a blinding flash of red light, and Harry's world fell away into soft, swirling darkness.

A black shadow flew high above the grey waters of the North Sea. The Ministry had long ago warded the grim isle of Azkaban against apparition. Freezing waves crashed against the rocks far below. Black robes swirled across the dark volcanic rock as Lord Voldemort gracefully alighted, gliding up the steep path to the towering stone fortress. A solitary figure under a gloomy sky. Still, Voldemort kept his hood low against the cloud-obscured sun. It hardly mattered, however, as the creatures with whom he had come to treat were blind.

Three such beings drifted on the freezing air, guarding the great iron gates of Azkaban. Their sightless, rotten heads turned silently toward the Dark Lord. But the Dementors did not draw toward him or widen the blackly open maws, which gaped beneath the pall of their tattered cowls, as Lord Voldemort stood before them.

Many wizards considered Dementors merely animals. Governable dogs who could not see or speak and were barely capable of thought. Apart from anything else, it was impossible to communicate with them with any degree of sophistication unless one had achieved a near telepathic mastery of the magics of the mind. As if that were not reason enough, the aura of despair generated by a single Dementor was enough to crush the spirits of most ordinary witches and wizards. Even powerful sorcerers tended to dismiss Dementors as soulless monsters, viewing them as little more than bogeymen to be repulsed with a Patronus Charm. Thus, very few magizoologists bothered with the obscure field of psychophagizology.

Tom Riddle's seventh year Care of Magical Creatures project had, in fact, been devoted to Dementor communication and reproduction - born of his fascination with all forms of soul magic. Professor

Kettleburn granted him permission to visit Azkaban with one of the Azkaban Security Officials who oversaw the running of the prison. That year, Voldemort discovered he was both incapable of casting even the meanest of Patronus Charms and completely immune to the Dementors' psychophagic abilities.

For Dementors fed off the happiness of those around them. The debilitating despair felt by its victim was not part of a Dementor's aura, but the sensation of positive emotions being siphoned away as the Dementor's magic brushes greedily against a fragile soul. What need had Lord Voldemort of a Patronus when, thanks to his Horcruxes, Dementors registered him as almost one of their own? As fluid a traveller of minds as they, Voldemort shed skin to seep into the air as a mist of dark puissance. He spoke wordless promises of devourment to the Azkaban Guards and soon a crowd floated around him, drawn by the thoughts he projected, their wheezy, rattling breaths unspeakably eager.

Some of them remembered him and he saw through their sightless memories a presence. A sense of youth and likeness which ghosted through their island fortress long ago. Devoid, yet neither Dementor nor prey. Voldemort gave them his greed for a happiness which did not exist within himself. A bitter thing to be consumed without satiety. They screeched agreement, sealing their bargain with companionship as they shared their miasma of pleasure with him. Thoughts and dreams they had leached from their imprisoned charges. Odd, eddying glimpses of his servants' souls, gleaned by alien minds. Dementors were communal beings, and they welcomed the spectral Voldemort into their fold. They would leave the island when he called, accepting the feast he promised in return.

But as the Dark Lord coalesced and departed - glancing back one last time at the creatures who had hailed him their near-soulless compatriot - his crimson eyes gazed wide and fearful at their long, faded cloaks and rotten, dessicated flesh. Voldemort shivered. His pale, skeletal fingers clenched, drawing blood against the idea that Harry's promises of fulfilment were as empty as those he had just offered the empty, ever-gluttonous Dementors, and for much the same reason.

The first thing Harry knew was the numbness. It was a strange thing to understand - how does one become aware that he is unaware? - but Harry could feel it, a strange, heavy blanket smothering his mind and his body, stripping him of sensation.

And then there were the voices. Hushed and frightened, as though they were floating across a long, empty tunnel.

"D'you - d'you think he's still in there?"

"Of course not. That's what the spells are there for."

Harry tried to move - he seemed to be lying down - but his limbs were heavy and useless, and he only managed to curl the fingers of his right hand.

"But where do you reckon he'll take him? He can't keep Harry like this all the time."

"I don't know, Ron." A pause. "This doesn't feel right."

"But if You-Know-Who can really get into his head... what other explanation is there for it? Harry's not stupid. He would have at least warned us first. It's not like him to keep all of this to himself. He wouldn't go off to find - You-Know-Who on his own."

"I *know* that... but what if he had good reason to?"

"Good reason?" There was a snort. "What reason could he possibly have to go and look for -"

At that moment, Harry finally managed to open his eyes. The light was painfully bright - Harry shut his eyes again almost instantly - but it was enough; the voices of his two best friends cut off in surprise.

"Harry," he heard Hermione say. "Oh, thank goodness. I was so worried you wouldn't wake up before -"

She stopped talking abruptly. Harry forced himself to open his eyes at this, just in time to see the distraught expression on Hermione's face where it hovered just above his own.

"I," Harry started to say, and then his body gave him just enough energy to sit up and hurl all over the floor. There was something horribly wrong with him. "I - what's the matter with me?"

"It's the spells," Hermione answered immediately, and then banished the mess Harry had made. She sounded grateful to have something to talk about. "Dumbledore's put a temporary seal on your magic. He said that - that your body might reject the effects at first, but it will prevent Voldemort from possessing you in the short term."

"Voldemort was never possessing me," Harry snapped irritably, rubbing his face. "He - oh, god." Harry wrapped his arms around his stomach. He thought he might be sick again. Hermione's hand was immediately at his back, rubbing circles through the cloth of his robes. Harry wanted to lean into the comfort of her touch - Hermione had always known how to make him feel better - but there was something, some reason that he should be angry with them.

Swallowing the bile in the back of his throat, Harry forced his heavy body to sit up further in a feeble attempt to take in his surroundings. There was a chalkboard to his right and rows of empty desks to his left. He was sprawled out on some kind of cot where the professor's desk should have been. And his skin... Harry lifted his hands to get a better look at them. His skin was paler than he had ever seen it. And if he looked very closely, he could see webs of gray and deep purple beneath the surface, crawling up his arms like a net.

"So it's true, then?" Ron said softly. He had taken one of the chairs from the empty desks and was sitting beside Harry's cot, as was Hermione. "Dumbledore said you'd gone to see You-Know-Who."

Harry was very quiet for a few moments. Even as he began to piece the events of the past few hours back together in his mind, he found it difficult to be cross with them for long. *Traitor*, his mind whispered. *You were going to abandon them.* "It's a great deal more complicated than that, but - but yeah. I did." He swallowed, trying to summon the energy to be angry. "Why are you here? Where's Dumbledore?"

"He wouldn't tell us," Hermione said quietly. "Just that he was taking you - away."

"He asked us to stay with you," Ron added. "He thought that we could, er, talk some sense into you."

That did the trick. Harry rounded on them, suddenly furious, even as his stomach lurched. "Perhaps you should have tried to do that before you turned me in."

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Hermione said, a note of distress creeping into her voice. "As soon as we saw that you were gone, we checked the map and saw that you'd left Hogwarts, and, well, you've been acting so *strange* lately - we didn't know what to think! And then I found that book under your pillow with Tom Riddle's name in the cover, and I thought that maybe - maybe it had possessed you, like the diary

possessed Ginny in second year. If I'd known you were coming back... I wouldn't have brought it to Dumbledore, really, I would have tried to talk to you about it, but - Harry, we were *scared*."

And the fear was etched so plainly in the furrow of her brow, her shining eyes, that Harry felt any remaining resentment he'd held toward them unravel in his chest. "It wasn't possessing me," Harry said miserably, looking at his lap and holding his stomach. "It was - a gift, I guess."

"A *gift*?!" Ron's face had lost any trace of its standard Weasley color. "Blimey, Harry, this is You-Know-Who, not some - batty old lady! Why would he be sending you *gifts*?"

"Because," Harry began, but found he didn't know where to start. Where could he possibly begin this story? With Harry opening his eyes in a bed of flowers with Slytherin's locket in his pocket? With a promise made in the firelight of a dream, established with a kiss? Or with the plan they had made that morning - the plan that Harry was sure would save the wizarding world, the plan that would lure Voldemort from the madness that caused all of this violence, the plan that -

Harry started. *The plan*. He was supposed to meet Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets that night after dinner - and he was stuck in an empty classroom! Panic cut through the numbness swathing his mind. Well, he may not have been able to perform magic, but he could still communicate with Voldemort, warn him of the trap he was walking straight into.

Desperately, Harry searched within himself for the thread of their connection, trying to call for help. But the Horcrux inside of him only flailed uselessly, struggling against the web of Dumbledore's magic binding its hands. The breath left Harry's lungs in despair. He tried again, a small noise escaping his lips in the effort - but it was of no use, and Harry fell back against the pillows, breathing heavily, eyes prickling with frustration. He could not reach Voldemort. Dumbledore had him trapped, and there was nothing he could do.

"Where will we go, Master?" Nagini asked, slithering restlessly about the edges of the room while Voldemort was busily summoning objects toward him, and placing them deftly inside a large trunk. She was, the Dark Lord thought, rather unsettled by his possessions flying this way and that about the room. "*Back to the forest*?" Her mind was filled with

warm sun and the scent of prey skittering through dense foliage.

"No," the Dark Lord said rather sharply as he finished packing his books. His voice softened as he reached down to stroke her diamond-shaped head. *"No, my pet, we shall travel far further than that. Some equatorial region where the earth is always warm against your scales."* Voldemort was still cold from his visit to Azkaban. He had not noticed it whilst conversing with the Dementors, but, now that he had returned, he felt a deep chill under his skin.

He levitated the mirror, tracing its smooth surface. *"Show me."* Harry was there, beaming out at him with the irrepressible grin that Voldemort had seen on those sweet lips this morning. The famous spectacles were a little askew as the glass Harry trembled against white flesh and spooling scales. The Dark Lord's lipless mouth tightened into a very private smile as he transfigured the vanity into a small hand mirror and placed it with care inside a heavily-warded silver box. He reached curiously for Potter's mind, wondering idly if the boy was also busily depositing his life back into his Hogwarts trunk.

There was nothing there. Voldemort frowned and tried again. Nothing. He hissed in frustration and tried to rip his way into Harry's thoughts, only for his magic to slice through a cavity where Harry should have been. Panic flumed within the Dark Lord. *Is he dead?* His hands shook and the room began to boil. The silver box fell through his fingers into the trunk. *Harry!*

It was as though the child had never existed.

The room was very hot. Did he have a fever? A part of Harry knew that it was because of the energy he was exerting - if he just stopped shouting and lay back down on the cot and closed his eyes like a good little savior, all of the horrible feelings would go away. But Harry had no other choice. He was going to fight this until it stole his consciousness or his sanity or both.

"Get out of my way." His vision was swimming, but he could still see that Hermione was on the verge of tears. She was standing in front of the cot, effectively blocking Harry's way to the door.

"No," Hermione said for the umpteenth time. "Harry, I can't let you do this."

"Get out of my way!" Harry knew he was snarling, but he couldn't find

it within himself to care. His stomach was roiling, and it was very hard to breathe; the putrid smell of vomit filled his nostrils.

"Harry," Ron pleaded. He looked badly frightened. "This isn't you, mate. You-Know-Who is - in your head, isn't he? You have to try to -"

"For the last time," Harry interrupted him loudly, "I am *not* possessed! Now GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

"We're your *friends*, Harry!" Hermione said desperately. Harry swung his legs over the side of the cot with great effort; the Horcrux was still thrashing wildly inside of him, resisting the unnatural nets of magic that tied it tight to Harry's soul. "Please, just try to talk to us about this!"

"There's no *time* to talk about it!" Harry tried to get up, but stumbled backward onto the cot again when his head nearly split open with pain. The lines beneath his skin seemed to burn brighter, reining him in, making his body curl in on itself. "You have to trust me! Why doesn't anyone trust me?"

"Listen to yourself!" Ron said. "Some lovesick old bat sends you Tom Riddle's old book, and suddenly you're bent on running away to You-Know-Who! Harry, he wants to *kill* you! None of this seems dodgy to you?"

"You don't understand," Harry insisted through the heat consuming his body, sweat beading on his temple. "There's no time to explain. He doesn't want to kill me anymore. I can change everything. I can *stop the war*. You have to get out of my way."

The notion of divulging the secret of Voldemort's Horcruxes - and his scar - flitted briefly across Harry's fever-ridden mind, but he dismissed it almost immediately. There was no time for Harry to explain everything he needed to right now. Harry had no idea how long he had been out - for all he knew, it could be past dinner already and Voldemort could be in the castle at this very moment. There would be time for explanations later, Harry could write to them and tell them everything, apologize for everything he'd hidden over the past few weeks. There would be time.

And they would understand. Harry would make them.

Ron was staring at Harry with open-mouthed shock, but Hermione's mouth tightened. "No," she said, and Harry's stomach plummeted; the Horcrux gave a furious, deafening shriek from its cage. "I'm sorry,

Harry, but that's not good enough. Voldemort will make you believe anything he needs to so that you'll come to him. Don't you remember Sirius? Don't you remember my - my parents?" Something passed over Hermione's face, and her eyes shuttered. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I can't let you."

A shifting, evanid darkness slipped through the crust of ice that lay thick across the lake. It ran like dye through the freezing water, causing those who dwelled in the black, reed-choked depths to shy away. Mermish whispers followed in its wake, but it did not heed them, sinking deeper and deeper until its cloudy shape brushed against glass.

It spilled from the lake window into the Slytherin Common Room with sinuous ease, deepening the fire-lit shadows with its presence. Several students shivered, rubbing their arms at the sudden cold, and Theodore Nott looked up from his book. Something seemed to infest the room, draining the light by which he had been reading; a black swilling of dust motes which caused the flames to gutter, as though in fear. Then it was gone and the fire was once again crackling merrily. Theodore blinked and let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

Onward it swept like a vast cloud of invisible locusts - half air half liquid - staining the corridors with dread like oil on water. It flowed into the empty Chamber of Secrets and the sight of the rotten corpse of the Basilisk served only to deepen the vengeful blackness with which it clotted the air. *Where is he? Where is he? Where is he?* It could only seek traces of energy, echoes of the boy it sought beyond all reason, until it finally caught the scent of Dumbledore's flashy, twinkling magic.

It hungered down corridor after corridor to coalesce in front of the door to a disused classroom. Hanging in the air for a moment, it began to lengthen into a tall figure, gaunt, with a face whiter than a skull, and blankly livid eyes. His tenebrous aura pulsed with vicious magic and his eyes glittered with madness. The black robes he wore seemed still to wisp and seethe. Fearful rage beyond imagining set its pale hand against the wood and all of the protective spells and jinxes melted away as Lord Voldemort knocked on the door.

All three teenagers fell instantly silent. Harry's heart lodged itself somewhere in the vicinity of his Adam's apple. His head began to spin.

This was it - Dumbledore had returned to take Harry away. Harry had not been able to escape in time. He would never see Voldemort again.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said once more, her voice very soft. She gave him one last pitying look - shuddering on the cot, drenched in sweat, defeat weighing him down heavier than any of Dumbledore's spells - and crossed the room to the door.

"It's for your own good, you know," Ron said. Harry could have hit him. What did Ron know about Harry's own good? What did *anyone* know about what was best for him?

There was a soft, terrified squeal of surprise from the door, and Harry looked up, startled out of his frustration. And blinked. Was this some kind of fever-dream? Harry did not know how to feel relief - could only stare with huge eyes at Voldemort, filling up the doorway of the empty classroom, tall and terrifying and real. The magic-eating disease within Harry's veins seemed to briefly loosen its hold. Voldemort was here. *Voldemort had come.*

"St-stay back!" Hermione seemed to have recovered from her initial shock and was now holding out her arms, blocking Voldemort's way. The wand in her hand was shaking. "You c-can't k-k-kill him! I - I won't let you!"

And Harry remembered very suddenly how to be afraid. "Hermione," he tried to say, but he seemed to have lost his voice in the resurgence of fear warring with the spell choking his magic, and her name came out strangled. *Stand aside, you silly girl*, Harry remembered, and was suddenly dizzy with fright. Voldemort wouldn't kill Harry, but that meant nothing for Hermione, who stood defiantly in the Dark Lord's path as Lily Potter once had, arms stretched out as though to embrace death.

"Get *out* of my way." Voldemort's cold, high voice had never seemed less human. Magic split the air and the Mudblood was forced away from the doorway, crashing against a wall, her wand suddenly in the Dark Lord's hand. The red-haired bloodtraitor screamed but Voldemort was faster. The yew wand flashed again and Weasley hit the floor, disarmed. Voldemort carelessly threw the two wands aside, his red eyes narrowing as they fixed upon the boy who lay feverish on a conjured bed.

"*Harry...*" he whispered in his soft, snake's hiss. His Harry, his child, his Horcrux *alive*. But Potter's skin was clammy and pale, shot through

with Dumbledore's power. There was no spark of connection when long, clawed fingers traced the curve of Harry's cheek, only the sharp bite of the glittering trusses with which the professor had bound Harry's magic. Voldemort touched the tip of his wand to Potter's scar and withdrew it as though scalded. An old curse indeed. *You would use my kind of magic against me, Dumbledore?* He kept expecting the incoherence of rage to descend once more, but all Voldemort could feel was relief. He had thought to find Harry's corpse, and in its absence was a frightened boy, stinking of sweat and sick, with green eyes marred by tears of exhaustion.

"It will all be over soon, Harry." The Dark Lord murmured tenderly, raising his yew wand once more. Potter's friends cried out as magic cut swiftly through soft flesh. Blood dripped from gashed white fingers and sprinkled the scarred forehead with scarlet traces of Harry's own magic and his Muggle mother's sacrifice. The blood of the Dark Lord reborn through this child, calling to the Horcrux trapped within. Voldemort opened his right hand and smeared crimson against Harry's face, burning away Dumbledore's power as he gathered the Horcrux in the protective, trailing wings of his robes. *Mine, mine, mine...* Livid eyes rose to glare murder at the two children staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment. They were surely complicit in this sacrilege, this gross insult to a piece of Lord Voldemort.

Harry knew neither the robes winding around him to support his body nor the cries of protest from across the room. There was only Voldemort's soothing red gaze, red like the blood dripping from long, expert fingers. This same blood had been stolen from Harry's own veins more than two years ago, but it felt strangely cool against his flushed face now, like it had lost its heat during its stay in the Dark Lord's body.

It was the most wonderful sensation. Harry gasped and shuddered as the pain drained from his limbs through the touch of the Dark Lord's fingers. Magic - Voldemort's magic, *Harry's* magic - raced, tingling, across his body. It spread from his bloody forehead and cheeks downward, gathering inside his chest, where Harry could feel the chains unraveling from where they'd bound tight the striving piece of soul inside him. Harry felt like he was positively glowing; his nausea subsided, the ache in his head faded away, and perspiration mingled with the blood on his forehead as his fever broke.

And then the Horcrux, finally relieved of its shackles, nearly exploded in pleasure as it finally registered the sensation of Voldemort's fingers

on his face. Harry arched into the simple touch, his blood singing with freedom and magic and the intoxication of their connection. *You came, you came, you're here.*

At last, Harry opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, pupils shrinking in the bright light of the classroom. And was horrified to see that Voldemort's gaze was no longer fixed on him.

"Hang on." Harry reached out with his newfound strength and grabbed hold of Voldemort's hand, still wet with blood. "It's - not their fault, you musn't hurt them. They were only trying to help -"

"Get away from him!"

Hermione's wand was back in her hand, and she had it pointed straight at the Dark Lord. Ron looked about ready to faint; his face was almost as white as Voldemort's. But Harry had never seen Hermione looking as brave or as desperate as she did right then. He would have been touched if he weren't so terrified. "Leave Harry alone! I'm - I'm warning you! I won't let you k-kill him! Professor Dumbledore is going to be back any minute - you'll never get away with this!"

Voldemort's voice was quiet and silken. "You show spirit and bravery, and Harry tells me you are clever. What do you imagine, my brave girl, that you will accomplish by duelling Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that Dumbledore himself never dreamed of?"

Surprise registered briefly across Hermione's face. "Harry is my best friend. I would do anything for him." Harry was momentarily affected, reminded of why he was so willing to give himself to the Dark Lord so they'd have a chance at a future he'd never see. "It's got nothing to do with - with cleverness, or bravery. I don't know what you've done to him, but I w-won't let you kill him. You'll - you'll have to kill me first!"

Well, that was more than enough for Harry. He pushed himself to his feet and tried to look as confident and trustworthy as he could with blood smeared all over his face. "Hermione. He hasn't done anything to me. I feel - brilliant, actually." He offered her a smile, and it came easily to him because it was true. He felt fantastic.

But the looks on their faces made him feel horrible. Harry took in his two best friends, really seeing them for the first time that day: Hermione with her wand outstretched in one trembling hand, Ron staring with wide-eyed horror back and forth between them. It had always been the three of them, they had always done everything

together, overcome every obstacle side-by-side. They had never left him. And now, Harry was abandoning them to undertake an impossible task all alone. His heart wrenched painfully in his chest. Would he ever see them again? Was this really it?

"Listen to me - there isn't time to explain everything right now. But I'm going to be all right, and you will too, and... that's all that matters. You've got to trust me."

"Harry..." This latest turn in conversation seemed to give Ron the courage to speak. He stepped away from the wall; the expression on his face was painful to look at. "You can't be serious. You're - you're giving up? After all that's happened?"

Harry had to bite down on his tongue. "It - isn't quite that simple, Ron -"

"So what, d'you think you can just join up with You-Know-Who and everything will get better?" Ron looked enraged. "Pardon me if you just expected us to be all right with that, but you're making *absolutely no bloody sense!*"

Harry felt like kicking a wall. "I've already *told* you! There's no time to explain!" This was not the way things were supposed to be going, not at all, and Harry was starting to feel sick to his stomach in a way that had nothing to do with Dumbledore's spells. "I'm leaving, all right? I've already made up my mind... I'm leaving. Everything's going to be all right now. This is going to fix everything!"

"You can't," Hermione interrupted in a voice choked with tears.

"Harry, you can't, you don't have to do this - no one wants you to do this, not even Professor Dumbledore -"

"Well what about what I want?" Harry said before he could stop himself. Hermione looked as though he might as well have slapped her in the face.

"What about me and Hermione?" Ron shot back angrily. "What about my sister and my parents, and Hermione's parents, and - and your parents? Harry, this is *You-Know-Who!* None of that matters to you?"

"I'm doing this for you!" Harry yelled. His aura pulsed and crackled with furious magic, but Ron did not seem to notice.

"No," his best friend said coldly. "You're doing this for yourself. That's what it's always come down to, isn't it? *What you want.* C'mon,

Hermione, I don't know why we're even bothering."

Harry felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. He had a thousand things to tell them, a thousand things he wanted to say, but he knew they were running out of time - Dumbledore really wouldn't leave Harry here with Ron and Hermione all day, and Harry had no plans to watch his headmaster and Lord Voldemort put Hogwarts in the state they had made the Ministry of Magic's Atrium last year with another duel.

But Hermione did not follow Ron as he made to leave the classroom. Her face was determined and brave, even through the tears on her cheeks, as she pulled Harry's wand out from her robes and handed it to him.

"You're my best friend, Harry. And I'll always stand behind you. And if this is what you think you need to do, then... then I trust you." Her voice broke, and she threw her arms around his neck unexpectedly. She gave him a damp kiss on the cheek as she pulled away.

"Enough!" Voldemort yanked Harry backwards by the collar, out of the arms of the Mudblood. How *dare* the wretched girl touch Lord Voldemort's Horcrux in such a manner! How *dare* she besmirch what was his and his alone with her filth! *It could never be the same with anyone else.* Instantly, the yew wand was pointed at Granger. Voldemort hardly noticed that his right hand was leaking blood down the back of Potter's robes. His left was utterly steady, while his head pulsed with boiling fury. It sickened and enraged him to imagine his possession intimate with this... this *nothing*.

Harry could beg for his forgiveness over her corpse.

Absurdly, Harry first thought the wave of bitterness and jealousy crashing over him was coming from Ron. But then a cold hand was gripping him by the back of his neck and Lord Voldemort had burst very suddenly back into the conversation, his wand in Hermione's stricken face.

There was no time to think. Harry leapt in front of Voldemort as he had in front of Mr. Ollivander earlier that morning. Except now Harry was many times more terrified for the life of someone much closer to him than an old wandmaker - and something strange was happening with his magic. It was as though all of the energy from the past few hours flooded back to him that moment in a surge of power he didn't

recognize. There was something funny about the air around him - it was thickening, a shield projected out of Harry's sudden and overwhelming fear.

"Calm down," Harry said furiously, and found that it nearly came out in Parseltongue when he saw the angry, greedy predator lurking in Voldemort's bloodstained eyes, hungry for Hermione's life. But god damnit, didn't Voldemort see how much Harry was giving up here? Didn't he see what Harry was leaving behind, how difficult this was for him? "She's my friend. There's nothing more to it than that. You'll leave her alone." He reached out toward Voldemort's seething thoughts with a psychic hand and another unexpected surge of magic, trying desperately to calm them. "I'm coming with you now. We're leaving."

Magic hit Voldemort's mind with a sharp sting of power. A flash of darkly silver eyes and flayed flesh wrapped in Harry's desperate aura - given voice by the mingled power of their blood. He swayed, clinging to Potter as something billowed in the thickening air between them. The girl screamed.

It bloomed and twisted; broken and distorted, and unmistakably Voldemort. Lord Voldemort the night he had first tried to kill Harry Potter. It swirled like flames around Harry and gazed down at them all with strange, silver-red eyes. One word passed its ghostly, lipless mouth as it stood between the Dark Lord and Hermione Granger, becoming with every second more real. Less substantial than a living thing but far more solid than any ghost. It held up a twisted, pale palm: "No."

"You... you-!" Voldemort stuttered out feeble hisses as the eyes of the apparition before him burned into what was left of his soul, allied to Potter's emerald glare, and magic far more powerful than it had any right to be. Then he realised: each touch, each intimacy - every *frisson* of connection between them had fed the Horcrux within Harry. They had, both of them, poured their souls into it. His mouth was wide with horror.

"At last..." The Horcrux drifted closer, swirling before Voldemort like a distorted mirror. "*Thank you, Harry. I promise your friends will be safe.*" And it dived into the Dark Lord's open mouth. Voldemort thrashed and shrieked in pain and fury. His tall body crashed to the floor as the Horcrux - loosed by Harry - bound him in seizure and fought him for control of his very self.

For a moment, Harry could only stare. He didn't know what to do. Panic and shock held him nailed to the ground as Voldemort thrashed at his feet, limbs jerking and flying across the floor, Dark magic hissing in the air. And then it occurred to Harry that *he was going to lose Voldemort* - lost forever to this strange, foreign sliver of soul, ripped unevenly and accidentally at a time when Voldemort's soul could hardly sustain any more damage - and he leapt into action.

"No!" Harry fell to his knees and seized the Dark Lord by his bony shoulders. His heart was pumping with adrenaline, and his veins were still thick with powerful magic, but Harry had no idea how to direct it, no idea what to do. Voldemort's eyes were wild and unseeing - it was impossible to keep him still - and Harry tried desperately to pull the Horcrux away, reaching out to Voldemort's mind, but the connection was garbled now that it seemed to have left Harry's body and entered Voldemort's. Harry's mind raced as he wrestled with the convulsing Dark Lord - what was he supposed to do? He knew no spell for this sort of magic - *how could one extract a soul* -?

And then it hit him. Harry lowered his mouth to Voldemort's thin, trembling lips and kissed him viciously, coaxing the Horcrux - *his* Horcrux, Harry's Horcrux - back where it belonged.

Something was calling him back. Through the cracked and broken house, it summoned him with a flash of green light. He cried and sunk his nails into the Dark Lord, unwilling to let go. *No!* He screamed as that same power dragged him up the stairs and into a child's bedroom. *No! He's mine - please!* He wept, coiling all the tighter. Except there was no baby standing there, clutching the bars of his cot. Instead there was the boy with luminous emerald eyes. *He abandoned me! He threw me away without even noticing! Please, Harry - Harry please he doesn't deserve-! Let me go!* He clutched at his prison and trembled against the feverish bars of Harry's flesh.

"No," Harry murmured against Voldemort's quivering mouth. "You belong with me now. I won't abandon you. Come back to me, please."

He stroked the pale flesh beneath him soothingly with both of his hands as he opened his mind to the piece of soul, drawing it from the Dark Lord's lips and calling it gently back to him. He embraced the Horcrux with his thoughts the same way he might embrace Voldemort's own mind when the Dark Lord was upset or angry. He wasn't even sure to whom he was making the soft promises, knew only

that he couldn't lose Voldemort now, not after everything that had happened.

Lord Voldemort lay unmoving on the floor, as still and pale as the dead with his gaunt body swathed in black silk like a shroud. Suddenly, a luminous, feather-light *something* ghosted upwards from Voldemort's lipless mouth. It stole up into Harry like shifting smoke, shivering within the boy, where it lay dormant and voiceless once more.

The Dark Lord's thin chest rose with a rushed intake of air through the slitted nostrils. The red eyes flickered open wearily, gazing up into Harry's face. His mind was spinning from the Horcrux's invasion as bloody, skeletal fingers rose to ascertain whether this was really Harry or yet another vision as his Horcrux ripped through memory and self. "...*Harry?*"

"That's me," Harry said, with a grin that bordered on hysterical. He buried his face in the Dark Lord's shoulder in a fierce hug. "Let's... not do that again."

Voldemort nodded wordlessly. Harry had saved him, pulled the Horcrux back. He had never thought of the pieces of his soul as being so separate from himself as to be able to possess *him*. *I won't abandon you*. Wary of the Horcrux lurking in the boy's embrace - his mind still in agony from the ruthless assault and reeling from this singular betrayal - the Dark Lord dazedly accepted the hug.

But the shard of soul was as it always had been, as if it had never escaped its vessel. Voldemort sat up and his thin, grateful mouth found Harry's, while his bony fingers cupped the boy's face. Both of them were shaking and covered in blood. Harry's kiss tasted of stale vomit. Voldemort did not care.

"I must admit," a familiar voice said thoughtfully from the doorway, "I never imagined that - of the two of you - Tom was the one being possessed."

Harry could not remember ever being so horrified. He scrambled backward, bloody cheeks flushing with mortification, and saw that they still not only had an audience - Hermione with her hand clapped over her mouth, Ron's eyes nearly bulging out of his face - but that it had grown to include perhaps the last person in the world Harry wanted to see, worse than Snape. His headmaster was scrutinizing

them with piercing blue eyes, an unreadable expression on his face. Did he see how weak Voldemort was? Was he going to take him away from Harry now? Harry wondered if the tears might win out after all. They had been *so close*.

Well, Harry wasn't going to let him go without a fight. Snarling, the Gryffindor rose to his knees unsteadily between them. He snatched Voldemort's fingers with one hand in a grip painfully tight and brandished his wand with the other. "You can't take him," he said, emotion swelling in his chest because there was nothing stopping him - because the only thing between Dumbledore and the death of the Dark Lord was a trembling sixteen-year-old boy. "I won't let you."

Dumbledore was still staring at them with that strange look in his eyes. After a long moment, he seemed to reach a decision and pulled out his wand. "Very well, Harry. You shall have your chance." Harry, expecting the worst, cringed, but a flick of the headmaster's wand produced only a tea tray on an empty desk. "I find that this sort of conversation goes much better over tea and biscuits, don't you?"

There was something Lord Voldemort had always wondered about animals. Why, in moments of unadulterated shock or terror - they froze. He had seen just the same expression on experienced wizards and small rodents when confronted with immanent death. The wide-eyed blankness of a question with no answer. But, sitting on the floor with Harry Potter clutching his hand like a talisman and Albus Dumbledore muttering something about biscuits, simply stunned the Dark Lord. He had no idea what to do or say.

Eventually it came to him - his head still resonating with pain - that if things were going to continue in this ridiculous way then he, Lord Voldemort, was not going to remain sitting on the floor for the duration of Dumbledore's inevitable moralising. He stood with as much dignity as he could muster, made his way to a chair, sat in it, and tried to look intimidating. "If we are really going to have this conversation, Dumbledore, then might I request that you also summon a pot of green tea? Or, failing that, some form of alcohol?"

"Of course. This topic never did sit very well with you... although I don't believe we've ever had it in quite this light, have we?" Dumbledore gave another wave of his wand, and a second pot of tea appeared beside the first. Harry did not make a move to drink from either. He hovered close behind the Dark Lord, eyeing his headmaster

warily even after Dumbledore pocketed his wand. His mouth still tasted like sick, and his magic was still crackling unhappily after being repressed for so long. He had no idea what Dumbledore was talking about.

"That was... a very interesting display," Dumbledore said after a moment. He seated himself across from the Dark Lord, still examining them both carefully. "Am I correct to assume it was not the first time?" Harry said nothing, his face on fire. Perhaps the blood smeared all over his cheeks would cover up his blush.

Voldemort's red eyes did not leave Dumbledore as the Dark Lord wandlessly poured himself a cup of thankfully strong and extremely hot green tea. It burned his tongue. In seconds, Harry seemed to have gone from being a courageous lion standing between Voldemort and the Headmaster to almost hiding behind Voldemort's chair. He would obviously have to bear the responsibility of conducting this conversation, as Potter was too busy dying of embarrassment. He took another sip of tea. The warm pain focused his still-whirling mind.

"Yes," he said simply, without the slightest trace of emotion in his soft, cold voice. "Harry and I have... developed an understanding."

"I was trying to tell you before," Harry put in fiercely, because somehow the word *understanding* didn't quite cut it for him. "He's going to end the war."

Dumbledore was silent. He looked thoughtfully between them for another long moment, processing this information. Harry wished desperately he could see inside the headmaster's mind. Did Voldemort have such luxury? Harry couldn't help but feel jealous. "You will remember, Harry," he said at last, "that I warned you about the power of manipulation. You must forgive me. It seems that I've forgotten what I've repeated to you about the most powerful magic of all." His eyes twinkled. "How foolish of me."

Voldemort went rigid. His scarlet, feline eyes narrowed and he *glared* at Albus Dumbledore. Never mind correcting Harry about the fact that he had not actually agreed to any such thing - except possibly a rather nebulous promise to stop killing quite so many people. He *loathed* the idea of Professor Dumbledore knowing *anything* about the private intimacies which had passed between himself and the boy - of the secret vulnerabilities he had

confessed to no one but Harry.

"Dumbledore, if the sole purpose of this conversation is for you to bask in your deluded notions about love, then I fail to see why I should sit through a speech I have heard many times before." Voldemort's tone was tight and impatient with leashed anger.

"I am concerned only for Harry's best interests," Dumbledore said. Some of the congenial twinkle left his gaze. "I'm thrilled my message has finally gotten through to you, Tom, but I'm afraid I must insist Harry finish his education." Harry began to protest, but Dumbledore spoke right over him. "He is not yet of age - he is but a boy of sixteen - and I cannot in good conscience allow him to leave the safety of Hogwarts to run away with the most powerful Dark wizard of the century. Surely, if you truly care for Harry, you can understand that."

"Naturally I understand, Headmaster." Voldemort replied coldly. "You seem to be labouring under the illusion that all of this was *my* idea."

"Hang on," Harry cut in angrily, trying to ignore the betrayal stinging in his chest as he turned back to Dumbledore. "You're saying it's all right for me to risk my neck every single year, but now that I've actually thought of something *useful*, it's too much of a responsibility?"

"Harry -"

"*I'm not finished!*" His fingernails bit into his palms, he was clenching his fists so hard. "I know what I'm doing! I've thought a lot about this. We're... happy together. Er, most of the time. You don't need to worry. And he - he doesn't force me to stay, or do anything else I don't want to. He's let me come back every single time." Harry tried not to sound uncertain about that last bit.

Dumbledore gave Harry a long, pitying look from behind his half-moon spectacles. "I have no doubt he's convinced you of that, my dear boy, but the reality is there would be nothing stopping him from going against his word once you are out of the bounds of my protection. And I simply cannot allow that to happen."

Despair rose in Harry's chest as he watched his headmaster take another sip of tea with his good hand. Dumbledore wasn't going to let him go. Would Harry even be able to sneak out of the castle to see Voldemort again? Dumbledore would no doubt be keeping a very close eye on him now that he knew Harry had been secreting off to visit the Dark Lord. Harry looked over at Voldemort miserably, taking

in the fact that this might be the last time he'd see him outside of their dreams for a very long time.

And then it came to him.

"His hand," Harry said suddenly, grasping Voldemort's shoulder. "His hand - can't you heal his hand?" He looked up at Dumbledore, who seemed very suddenly at a loss for words. The headmaster's blue eyes were wide with surprise; Harry thought he might have even seen a glimmer of hope there. "Sir, Voldemort told me that - that you aren't going to make it, because of the curse in your hand. But... if he made it better... would you let me go?"

"There's not a cure for this sort of magic, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly. "We've done all that we can, but it seems that I am able only to contain the curse to my hand - and even that is not a permanent solution."

"That's not true," Harry insisted vehemently. "I'll bet Voldemort can fix it. You don't have to die. And if you don't think he'll keep his word - well... you'll be a lot better off fighting the war alive. Voldemort will fix it!" He looked over at the Dark Lord, suddenly uncertain. "Right?"

Harry's emotions assailed Voldemort as the boy's hand gripped the Dark Lord's shoulder. Feverish hope beating away at Voldemort's aching mind. He *loathed* Potter in that instant. Old anger flared: *the disinterred golden box, lying open and empty beside the hole... the prickle of Albus Dumbledore's filthy magic...*

The Dark Lord's high voice was whisper soft. He viewed the room almost from a distance. A cold, lonely place far removed from the rage which choked his heart. "And you accuse *me* of not troubling to learn that which I do not value. The boy is correct. Certainly it is possible to lift the curse trapped within your hand. It was *I* who created it, after all."

Voldemort's crimson eyes narrowed dangerously as he turned to address the boy hovering beside him. "But something of Lord Voldemort's was taken in exchange for that curse, Harry, and it..." The flat nostrils quivered as he took a shallow, painful breath in an effort to keep himself from striking down the Headmaster in retribution. "Its loss is *irreparable*."

"Oh," said Harry quietly. He remembered the conversation that had

ended his first lesson with Dumbledore. It felt like a million years ago now; he had fallen asleep that night and awoken in a flowerbed, Tom Riddle's hand on his shoulder. That first, fateful dream. That was the first time Dumbledore had acknowledged he'd been injured - injured acquiring a ring that had belonged to Voldemort's grandfather.

"It was that ring, wasn't it." Harry's voice was very soft. "It was a Horcrux."

"And I'm afraid it's been destroyed," Dumbledore replied. He did not sound very sorry at all about this. He was still watching them both shrewdly, his black, shriveled hand hidden in the folds of his robe.

"Right," said Harry miserably. Turning back to Voldemort, he tightened his grip on the Dark Lord's shoulder, loading his gaze with pleading urgency. His voice was low when he spoke, a private conversation; he tried to ignore his headmaster's prying eyes. "But - it's *not* irreparable. I... I was going to show you how to make it better." His heart felt like it had sunken all the way to his stomach.

Until Harry, Lord Voldemort had told no one of his Horcruxes all his long life. They were his most precious secrets. Now Potter and Dumbledore were discussing them as though they were simple *objects*, the loss of which could be forgiven.

As though Marvolo Gaunt's ring were a trinket the loss of which the Dark Lord must accept. They could not understand what it was to lose something so necessary, where not even memory of what was could recall such vanished treasure. It had been silently removed and Voldemort, wounded in the soul, had not realised. He had simply sunk further into madness.

"My soul is not my wand, Harry." Words uttered in Parseltongue were safe from Dumbledore's curiosity. *"Even you cannot restore my vanquished Horcruxes. I shall never regain what I was."* He seethed with barely suppressed rage. *"You ask me to heal a man who has ever been my avowed enemy, and who happily informs me that he has destroyed that which I treasure beyond all else. Why should I allow my foe yet more time in which to plot my destruction? He claims he does not fear death. So let him die."*

"But it won't matter," Harry protested softly. "We're going away." He paused and looked slyly at Voldemort through his lashes. "You don't need to be afraid of him anymore."

Lord Voldemort shot out of his chair - impossibly tall and trembling with white-faced fury. His crimson eyes gleamed murder and power thickened around him into tangible darkness, suffusing the room with horror. His temper, already stretched to the limits of understanding, snapped. "I DO NOT FEAR DUMBLEDORE! GIVE ME HIS HAND!"

Despite the Dark magic sparking in Voldemort's aura, Dumbledore did not look impressed or frightened. He followed the Dark Lord out of his seat, setting his teacup carefully on the table and examining Voldemort more as he would an unruly student than a furious Dark wizard. "Very well." He extended his right hand, an ugly, blackened thing, the shrunken fingers curling inwardly toward the palm.

Voldemort seemed to sink into an almost trace-like state. His magic still blazed with rage, but it had turned inward somehow, transformed into deadly, single-minded focus. With a simple flick of the yew wand, the Dark Lord's hand was free of blood and as smooth and pale as it had ever been.

Immediately, his now-healed right hand snaked out to grasp Dumbledore's wrist, while the tip of his wand traced the lines of the Headmaster's palm, as though reading his future. "This is Severus' work," the Dark Lord murmured to himself. "Yes... very clever. I would expect nothing less..." Voldemort's wand began to emanate a soft, golden glow as his head tilted a little to one side in thought. "And yet, Severus, perhaps in your reverence of the Dark Arts you forget that we do not bow to the darkness. We *command* it."

The wand of yew jerked upward suddenly and Dumbledore's hand convulsed wildly. And drawn out of the shaking, arthritic fingers was a dense, billowing *evil*. It was grotesquerie which licked the professor greedily with the stench of terrible decay. Like Fiendfyre, it shifted and danced: a hundred maws, sockets, talons, and vicious things beyond imagining strove to break Voldemort's leash and devour every living creature. It was magic dragged from some abyssal plane, keening to be fed. It fought the Dark Lord for its freedom, sweeping around him - crying out with its many inarticulate, childish voices as it withered and starved in the empty air under merciless crimson eyes.

A heavy silence fell over the room as the hungry voices faded beneath Voldemort's wand. Dumbledore looked like he had been stunned; his face was completely devoid of colour, and his blue eyes were huge with shock. There was a soft squeak from across the room, where Ron and Hermione were still standing, watching their negotiations with

equally white faces. Harry realized that he himself was clutching the lip of a desk in a death-grip, heart racing and mouth dangling slightly open.

Dumbledore lifted his right hand slowly. It was shaking a little as he raised it before his face, curling and uncurling his wrinkly, pale fingers. It looked just as healthy as his left hand; there was no evidence whatsoever that a deadly curse had been festering in its bones for the past several months.

"How does it feel, sir? Is it - healed?"

A small smile lit up his headmaster's face. It barely touched his mouth, but Harry could see it in the crinkle of his blue eyes - unadulterated relief. "Yes, my boy. Thank you, Tom. A very fine job. It seems that I am in your debt."

Harry had no words for the happiness that swept over him in that moment. *Dumbledore was going to live*. Voldemort had cured him. Before he could think twice about the instinct, Harry threw his arms around the Dark Lord. "That was *brilliant*," he said breathlessly, grinning up at Voldemort with admiration. Harry was going to get to leave with him; his heart was soaring on wings of elation. "Thank you."

Voldemort was still out of breath from the energy it took to control the vast, dark energies contained within his curse. Watching that brutal, entropic force meet its death evoked within him something like grief. Like him, it had hungered to end life. Part of Voldemort had shrieked in protest at lifting the curse from Dumbledore, had screamed along with the fading magic.

Suddenly, arms were flung about the Dark Lord and Voldemort - who could master unimaginable darkness - staggered under the force of the emotion which surrounded him with abrupt euphoria. He hardly heard Dumbledore's words. Harry was beaming up at him as though he were the most wonderful person in the world.

The feelings which shone through their connection were indescribable. Voldemort smiled back bemusedly – pulling skin away to reveal sharp teeth – hardly knowing why he did so. It was a fragile, uncertain thing. Swept along by Harry's emotion, he leaned down to press his flat nose into the boy's black hair and closed his eyes - exhausted.

For a short and wonderful space of time, the rest of the room and the events surrounding it faded into the back of Harry's mind. There was only Voldemort's arms around him, his breath upsetting Harry's already messy hair, the fingers stroking his back.

Harry couldn't imagine anything so lovely. There would be no more late, restless nights with an aching scar, fretting over Voldemort's plans and when they would next threaten Harry's life. There would be no more nights spent in a very different manner, alone and equally restless, his heart greedy for the connection he had never before known could bring him such happiness. There would be no more anxiety for the lives of his friends and their families.

There would be no more war.

"This is truly the path you desire, Harry?"

Green eyes blinked open. The boy pulled his arms reluctantly from the Dark Lord's neck, but he couldn't quite bring himself to step away. "Well, I've been saying that all along, haven't I?" He tried to keep the irritation from his voice.

"And you, Tom - you would take him with you?" Dumbledore was studying Voldemort's face like there was something he didn't quite understand there. "I insist that he must be allowed to visit his friends on a regular basis. It is clear to me that you care for the boy, but you must give me your word that he will come to no harm at your hand. I shall know if he is mistreated."

And how shall you know, I wonder? Will Severus tell you? He fought his annoyance at Dumbledore: a suffocating presence causing Harry to shift from their embrace. "You have my word," Voldemort's tone could not have been icier. Gazing at the headmaster's healthy right hand - and the knowing gleam in the man's eyes - was nearly unbearable. He ought not to have lost his temper. *He ought to have fought Dumbledore for the boy.* Even while still suffering from the after-effects of possession, he would have won.

Well, that didn't sound terribly convincing. Harry felt a prickle of irritation. This was his life, after all - was this the best Voldemort could do to declare his good intentions toward Harry? But one look at both of their faces told Harry this was no time to disturb their tentative truce. It seemed only a matter of moments before one of them changed their minds with inevitably disastrous consequences.

Even so, Harry found himself hesitating. Could this really work? What if Harry wasn't good enough – what if Voldemort wanted to return to the war? What if Dumbledore decided that the subdued Dark Lord was still a threat and came after them? And then there were Ron and Hermione, still standing near the door, looking completely in shock and frightened and betrayed. Harry was leaving them... he'd always found the summer months insufferable for the absence of his two very best friends, but now he was abandoning them for something potentially much longer than a summer vacation...

Harry shook himself. He would be allowed to visit, Dumbledore had even said so himself. Besides, he had thought long and hard about this. It may not have been the easiest choice, but it was the right one. He had to try this. The chance to help Voldemort - to make him smile, *genuinely*, to wake up every morning no longer alone, to keep him calm and happy - and all while saving the lives of so many... it was worth what he was leaving behind.

Harry took the Dark Lord's hand into his own, holding it tight. "That settles it, then." His voice was quiet. "I'm leaving." He deliberately did not look at his two best friends as he spoke; he might crumple if he saw their faces. "I - I've still got to get some things from the dormitory, sir. If I have your permission."

Dumbledore sighed. "Hogwarts will always be your home, Harry. You will never need my permission to wander these corridors." He paused, glancing at Voldemort. "Although, I'm not quite certain all of the other professors will be so easily convinced of your companion's harmlessness. Perhaps it will be best if Tom does not accompany you."

"Nonsense. I am perfectly capable of disguising myself, as you well know." Voldemort blurred and writhed like the Dark magic he wielded, winding around the hand which gripped his own. Sight slipped away into scent and taste and a long, pale snake with beady red eyes coiled up Harry's wrist. It gave a soft hiss of amusement as the boy yelped in surprise, its forked tongue flicking out against warm flesh.

A rather undignified noise escaped Harry's lips as the Dark Lord's hand transformed into slippery scales right between Harry's fingers. He stared at the snake wound around his arm in breathless surprise. "*You're really something else, y'know?*" he whispered with a small smile.

Dumbledore was eyeing the serpent with apprehension. Perhaps he too was not yet convinced of Voldemort's innocence. "I suppose it can't

do any harm," he said at last, not looking very happy about it.

"Thank you," Harry said suddenly. Dumbledore looked up at him, surprised. "For... everything."

"No, Harry. It is I who should be thanking you." Dumbledore offered him a smile lined with worry. "Do not forget what I said. Hogwarts will always welcome you home with open arms."

"I won't, sir." Harry touched the end of a long, white tail and turned away, unwilling to give his professor a chance to change his mind. But instead of fleeing to his dormitory, he turned to his friends. They were still staring at Harry like he had sprouted a second head. But then again, he supposed that might be less of a shock than all they had learned in the past hour. Harry swallowed nervously. "Would you - er - like to come with me?"

Hermione took one look at the Dark Lord's disguise and then back at Harry again. "Of course we will," she said, and although her voice shook, the glare to which she treated Ron had no trace of fear. "Won't we, Ron?"

Harry wasn't sure if Ron even noticed the glare - he was too busy gaping at Harry's left arm - but at Hermione's words he looked up, swallowing and looking guiltily up at his best friend. "Yeah, of - of course," he said, his voice a little higher than it normally was. He halted. "Look, about before... I - I didn't really - I was just -"

"Don't worry about it," Harry said, and Ron looked up gratefully. Harry felt as though a very heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders; he gave Ron a grin which the redhead easily returned, albeit shakily.

"So, Harry," Ron said, a note of fear creeping back into his voice. He couldn't seem to stop looking at the serpent. "If - if You-Know-Who can turn himself into a snake, does that mean that -" he paled, if possible, even further, "that he turned himself into an old lady too?"

Unexpected laughter bubbled up and out of Harry's chest in a great rush. "There was never any old lady, Ron," he said, unable to hide his grin. Ron somehow did not seem comforted by this information. "C'mon. Let's go."

Voldemort allowed the children to chatter, doing his best to ignore Weasley's foolish comments. It was surprisingly easy to absent himself

from human language. For a time, he had forgotten the sound of English outside of his own thoughts. He had lived inside the minds of serpents for so long that words withered and ghosted away like dry leaves.

He slithered further up the red wool of Harry's jumper, enjoying the pulsing, mammalian warmth the boy provided, soaking it up along with Harry's emotions. He coiled comfortably and lay still. It was not quite sleep but *rest*. Finally away from Dumbledore and still drained from the ravages of possession, the tension slid out of the Dark Lord and he nestled peacefully around Harry's neck, secure in the fact that the boy would not let him come to harm.

Astral projection was a very delicate art, quite different from the Western techniques of rendering oneself invisible or incorporeal. To project oneself outward on the magical plane, while leaving behind a physical shell, was a much more complex endeavour than transfiguring oneself wholly into a spirit. Slowly, the wool of Potter's jumper and the quiet, human conversation around him fell away as Voldemort entered a meditative trance.

It was not a classically auspicious time to perform such a ritual. Voldemort's old teacher, Lady Rokujo, would have disapproved of him stripping her art down to its bare essentials. She had insisted on only performing black magic in full ceremonial attire during the Hour of the Ox. That made it very easy for young Voldemort - who saw no use for such tradition - to dispose of her on the noon after completing his studies.

Like most Dark Arts, the ritual he was about to perform was fuelled by strong emotion. He allowed his sense of furious betrayal to sit within him and slowly give itself form. There was not much time, but the ancient technique could not be rushed. Ordinarily, components would be necessary in order to channel such magic: effigies woven with the victim's name, flesh, hair or blood. But Voldemort's Death Eaters were already marked.

The snake exhaled and a sliver of a ghost wriggled out from its mouth and bled away into the air. The *ikiryō* sped through the crackling lines of power which linked the Dark Lord to his servant.

In the darkness beneath Severus' sleeve, lines of ink began to pulse. Professor Snape paused, rubbing his tattooed forearm. Unseen, the serpent slid slowly from the skull, like a snail slowly wriggling free of its shell, and slithered free across skin. It wound its way up Snape's

arm and the nape of his neck to slip beneath greasy, black hair. Then it struck.

Snape - on his way to Dumbledore's office - stumbled sideways as something bit into his Occlumentic shields. He gasped and fought the corrosive magic, groping the wall for balance as it flicked its poisonous tongue across his mind. *A valiant effort, but I simply cannot allow you to warn the Headmaster... I shall kill you, traitor – be grateful you are yet of use to Lord Voldemort.* The serpent devoured thought and memory and, as its jaws closed on the struggling Potions Master, its venom bloomed new memories in place of the old. There was a scream, but the corridor was deserted.

The sleeping snake shifted a little around Harry's neck as the *ikiryō* returned. Crimson eyes flickered drowsily. No one, least of all Potter, would ever know Lord Voldemort had been anywhere else.

They arrived at Gryffindor Tower without incident. The corridors were nearly empty; everyone was in class. The three friends struggled to make conversation most of the way to seventh floor, but Harry was feeling moody and confused, and by the time they entered the empty sixth year boys' dormitory, they had fallen uncharacteristically silent.

Harry gave a long look around the room in which he'd spent the past six years. His heart throbbed painfully as he remembered the first time he had set foot in this room, astounded by how much space he had in his four-poster - he had never been able to stretch out in his cupboard at the Dursley's. He had made some of his best friends in this room, his brothers of Gryffindor house. Aside from Ron, he would not get to say goodbye to any of them.

Packing was a silent, depressing affair. Harry could see that his friends were trying hard to alleviate the tension, but Harry found it difficult to play along. Hermione teased him about the mess in his trunk and easily tidied it with a few waves of her wand. Ron made a joke about missing Neville's snoring, but for some reason it only hurt to think about this, and Harry could only manage the smallest of smiles. They packed away his map, his clothes, his spellbooks. They packed away the many pairs of mismatched socks Dobby had knitted him, and his broomstick servicing kit. They packed away his photo album, full of pictures of his parents.

They packed until there was nothing left to pack.

Harry looked down at Voldemort, wondering what to do now, but the

Dark Lord appeared to be asleep. His snake's head was buried in Harry's jumper, and he had not moved for a very long time. Their connection pulsed with contentment. Harry did not want to disturb him.

Hermione touched his cheek with gentle fingers, and he looked up, his chest aching. "Oh, Harry. This is all very brave, but... I can't help but wonder if you'll really be happy doing this."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. He threw a nervous glance at the snake sleeping happily around Harry's shoulders. "I'm sorry, mate. I mean, I never imagined that you were doing - *that* - with You-Know-Who." He looked a little green. "And you're sure this is - what you want?"

"Yeah. He's actually, er, not all that bad." Harry felt a blush rise unwillingly to his cheeks. "He's... quite kind to me."

"Oh," said Ron, sounding strangled. "Right."

"Right." Harry looked away, swallowing. There was a short, awkward silence. "So... I guess this is it then."

"Of course it's not," said Hermione fiercely. "You'll visit. You must."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, nodding fervently and trying not to sound uncertain. "All the time." He touched Voldemort's tail with his hand again. Their connection was an anchor in all of this painful emotion. "And - and you'll take care of Hedwig, won't you?"

"Yeah, definitely!" said Ron. "We'll - send you letters! Loads of them."

"Yeah," said Harry, suddenly grateful beyond belief for their presence in his life. His friends wouldn't abandon him, no matter what. They would never leave him alone.

But Hermione looked dangerously close to hugging him again, and Harry did not feel up to dealing with the outburst that would inevitably follow. "Well, I'll see you soon, I s'pose."

"Yes," they both said, and Harry could see that they were trying hard to believe this was true. Swallowing hard, Harry levitated his trunk with his wand and took one last, painful look around the dormitory.

"Bye, then."

"Bye," they said, and Harry closed the door behind him.

It was shaping up to be a beautiful winter day. Harry pulled his cloak around himself in the icy breeze and paused on the steps outside the castle entrance, his trunk still hovering in the air beside him. Aside from a small class of Care of Magical Creatures students shivering near the lake, there was no one else out here. Dumbledore had not had any last minute thoughts; there had been no army of Order members intercepting him on his way out the castle. Harry was free.

The boy looked down at the unfamiliar weight coiled around his neck. Voldemort had hardly moved since they'd left the classroom which had served as Harry's prison. Being a snake was very sleepy business, apparently.

"Do you plan for me to carry you all the way to Brazil, then?" Harry murmured with an affectionate smile. He stroked the Dark Lord's scaly head with a finger. "Not that you weigh very much. Y'know, for the Heir of Slytherin, your Animagus isn't very frightening. I think I've worn heavier scarfs."

The snake grew, writhing in the air, and dark smoke solidified into black robes as smooth coils changed to lean arms wrapped possessively around Harry's shoulders. Voldemort's soft words misted in the chilly air and he shivered in the sudden cold. "That was not my Animagus. A truly *great* wizard may transfigure himself into any shape he desires." He sniffed haughtily and the slitted nostrils flared. He almost looked embarrassed.

"Your Animagus isn't a snake?" Harry blinked up at the Dark Lord in surprise, even as he leaned gratefully into his arms. He knew he should have been worried about Hagrid's class spotting them standing together on Hogwarts' steps, but Voldemort's embrace was so nice that Harry couldn't help but linger for a few small moments. The trunk wobbled slightly in the air as Harry's concentration waned. "But you're the Heir of Slytherin! It *hasto* be a snake. I think the Sorting Hat would've noticed if it was actually a badger or something."

"Impertinent child," Voldemort hissed, but there was no real venom in his words. "As the Heir of Slytherin, I *naturally* have a deep affinity with serpents. However, with Animagus transformations it is not a question of preference but *personality*. And Lord Voldemort is in a unique position to inform you that - as sentimental as I am about snakes - the majority of them are rather lazy creatures who think of little but their next meal."

The Dark Lord waved his wand and Harry's trunk shrunk to the size of

a marble and flew into one of the boy's pockets. "Come, my treasure. It is time we were on our way."

Harry touched the miniature trunk in his pocket and tried not to gape. He had never mastered shrinking his trunk without missing a few things hidden inside. He had ended up shrinking all of his socks beyond repair when they had first learned the charm in his fourth year, before he had given it up for a lost cause. Ron had found the entire situation hysterical and had refused to let him borrow any until Harry had managed to enlarge them to a wearable size again.

This reminder of Voldemort's magic only served to make Harry more grateful for his presence. The boy took another look at the castle behind him, but found the sadness that had gripped him in his dormitory seemed to have been left there with his friends, a distant, numb thing in the back of his mind. This wasn't goodbye, not really.

"Thanks," Harry said suddenly. "For, you know. Coming and finding me. I was... afraid for a while there."

"If I am honest... so was I. When I could no longer sense our connection I assumed you had been killed, despite the enchantments I laid upon you. I came to Hogwarts to discover the truth and - if necessary - to exact reparations." Anger flitted across Voldemort's ophic features - a dangerous gleam in his livid eyes - but it vanished almost immediately as he looked down at the boy beside him. The Dark Lord held out long, pale fingers to Harry. "But we ought not to dally here where some fool might see us and jump to the wrong conclusions. Shall we?"

The wrong conclusions. Harry stifled a childish snicker - anyone who noticed the two wizards holding each other on the steps would probably make assumptions a lot closer to the truth than Voldemort seemed to think. "Yeah, all right."

Harry took a deep breath and slipped his hand in Voldemort's own. He wondered how exactly the Dark Lord planned to leave - after all, as Hermione was fond of reminding him, it was impossible for anyone to Apparate or Disapparate on Hogwarts' grounds - but then Voldemort's arms were wrapped tight around his body, there was an exhilarating rush of magic, and the ground fell away beneath their feet.

They streaked toward the sky, Voldemort's silky robes billowing around them, the wintry air freezing and wonderful against his watering eyes and cheeks. "*Oh*," breathed Harry through a grin that

was almost painful on his quickly numbing face. He could do nothing but laugh and cling to the Dark Lord's arms where they held him fast around his chest as they soared across the lake, giddy with the joy of flight. When Harry glanced backward at the school, the castle was but a shrinking shape in the far distance, growing steadily smaller, nearly hidden by clouds.

And then they passed over the high walls surrounding the grounds - walls that had forever been a symbol of safety to Harry, that had always kept all manner of horrible things away from him - and vanished with a crack in the icy air.

Part IX

They whirled back into reality on a long drive lined with high hedges. Lord Voldemort walked fast, pulling Potter along with quick, gliding strides. "Everything is prepared. I merely need to collect dear Nagini and my belongings." Now that they were out from the shadow of Hogwarts, Voldemort was filled with calmly euphoric purpose. He and Harry would travel to far distant places and, with Voldemort's guidance, the boy would come to realise the essential truths of the world. Potter would heal his mind and he would cure Potter's delusions. Beneath the Dark Lord's hood, feral crimson eyes glittered with excitement.

Potter made a sudden noise of delight from behind him. "Hang on!"

The Dark Lord turned to see his Horcrux diving into a snowy hedge. The boy eventually emerged, knees covered in white and a leaf sticking from his hair, clutching a broomstick. "It's my Firebolt!" he announced, grinning. "It's an international standard broom, top of the line! I left it here when I – ah – that first day I came to see you." He paused, clearly discomfited by the reminder of that ill-fated encounter. "D'you think I could – bring it along? I got it from, well..." He bit his lip. "It's very important to me."

"If there is one thing about which I know absolutely nothing, it is Quidditch." Voldemort said loftily, regarding the broom with distaste. He could not see what all the fuss was about. "Bring the broom if you wish, Harry, I have no opinion on the matter."

The Dark Lord continued on up to the front steps and the door to the manor slid silently open with a wave of his hand. Narcissa was nowhere to be seen, but *there* in the dimly lit hallway - coiled up on the richly embroidered carpet and awaiting his return like the faithful creature he knew her to be - was Nagini. Voldemort let out a hiss of affectionate pleasure and lowered a hand to accept her weight. "*My dear one...*" he whispered as she climbed slowly up his arm to rest her long, heavy body across his shoulders. He stroked her green scales with cold, thin fingers.

Nagini's large, yellow eyes turned to Potter, who was entering just behind the Dark Lord, still happily clutching his broomstick. "*Master... Master! You have returned to your Nagini! And you have brought dinner, yes, yes...?-!*"

"I'm not *dinner*," the boy retorted, and then turned his petulant glare on Voldemort. "Tell her I'm not dinner. Why does she need to come, anyhow?"

"I'm afraid I must disappoint you, my pet. You may not eat Harry Potter, for he carries a precious piece of Lord Voldemort just as you do. Harry, there is no question of my leaving sweet Nagini." He hand reached up to unconsciously stroke her head. *"You will honour and defend one another, as is befitting."* The Dark Lord lowered Nagini back down and regarded both Horcruxes sternly. *"I am going upstairs to retrieve my things and by the time I return, I expect the two of you to have come to an accommodation."* Voldemort turned on his heel and swept up the corridor without a backward glance.

Nagini stared at Harry, lifting her forked tongue to the air. *"You are a smelly boy, yes... you stink of fear and your own fluids. You are probably diseased and bad meat anyway..."*

"I'm not afraid of you!" Harry protested, scowl deepening. *"And I'm not going to - accommodate you, either. Even if you are a Horcrux."*

The word suddenly tasted very bitter on his tongue. Harry hated the idea of this stupid, useless creature holding a part of Voldemort's soul. Just how many of these things were there, anyway? First the locket, then the ring, and now a gigantic snake that had already tried to kill him. Harry decided if he learned anytime soon that Wormtail was a Horcrux as well, he would strongly consider calling this whole thing off.

"Then Master will punish you!" Nagini hissed gleefully, circling Harry. Her golden eyes were bisected by two vertical slits, making her gaze eerily similar to Voldemort's. *"Master does not like to be disobeyed, no, no he does not...! I am his Nagini, not you! I am! No, no - not you! He kills smelly humans like you!"*

"I think he likes me just fine, thanks," Harry hissed through teeth clenched in irritation. His knuckles were white around his broomstick handle. *"And he isn't going to kill me anytime soon, so you can get that idea right out of your head. He likes me because I'm a smelly human. We've, er... reached an understanding."*

Nagini rose up and up - almost as tall as the boy - her mouth opening wide in threat. *"You understand nothing of the Master! Nagini found him first, yes, yes! Nagini was his when he did not know what he was. He tested Nagini and Nagini did not die - she carried him like an egg within."*

Nagini feeds him and guards him! He is her Master and hatchling both. You came at night to hurt us! But Nagini smelt you, ripped you, yes, yes...!" She dropped back down and began circling Potter again, flicking her tongue at the interloper. *"Warm bloods think they know the Master - then Master kills them. Nagini knows, Nagini sees..."* The huge snake began to circle closer, her golden eyes gleaming. *"You speak it, Harry Potter, but you are an egg thief – a weak warm blood like the rat man! Yes! You do not deserve the Master's presence! No, you do not!"*

Harry was very nearly snarling. It was very hard for him to keep from drawing his wand. *"How would you know?! You're just a stupid snake! I've done things with your - Master that you haven't got a clue about!"* His cheeks went a little pink.

He was so distracted by his frustration that he didn't even hear the door opening.

A bronze handle turned slowly, and wide, pale eyes peered out through a sliver of doorway. A wand swished down. *"Confrigo!"* A vase exploded, raining shards at Nagini. There was a *bang* and a flash of red light and the snake was thrashing and spitting, coil after coil flung upward into an elaborate chandelier. Crystals flew everywhere as Voldemort's snake fought against the spell. *"Now, Potter! Run!"*

Narcissa Malfoy stood in the doorway, her blond hair wild about her shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing-?!" Harry knocked the wand out of her hand with a panicked *Expelliarmus* before she could do any more damage. "I'm not - I don't need to *run*! I came here on purpose! Look what you've - oh - oh, blimey, he'll be back any minute!" Harry's heart was stuck somewhere in his throat; he felt dizzy with horror. Malfoy's mum had just *attacked Nagini*. Harry knew there was only one reaction Voldemort would have to that, and that was *not* how Harry had planned to start their little vacation together. *"You're the one that's got to run! He's going to hurt you - you need to get out of here!"*

"The Dark Lord *won't*-!" But whatever Mrs Malfoy had been about to say was abruptly cut off as Nagini fell: a chaotic mass of shattered chandelier and writhing serpentine fury. Narcissa screamed and dove for where her wand lay in a sea of broken glass. The giant snake lunged, fangs sinking into air as Narcissa scrambled backwards toward the door, throwing spells wildly. But her hand shook and her curses bounced off the green scales, destroying everything but the raging serpent poised to strike –

- who was thrown suddenly off-course as Harry hurled himself at her in a collision that knocked the breath from his lungs, launching them away from the woman cowering on the floor. They went down together, skidding across shattered glass and stone (*and this was vaguely familiar, it had happened before, not such a long time ago, equally as terrifying*), Harry wrapping himself clumsily around the thrashing serpent and wrestling her forcefully to the ground. "Get *out* of here!" he shouted, trying desperately to pin the snake to the carpet while avoiding her rage. "NOW!"

Livid eyes glared down at the ruined hallway from the top of the staircase. Potter and Nagini were wrestling in a circle of debris. "*Stop this at once.*" His words were not loud but the cold, dangerous hiss silenced both boy and serpent. The Dark Lord glided down the stairs. With one graceful swish of yew wand, everything in the room hurried furtively back to its previous state, as though the shards of glass were as terrified of Voldemort as everyone else was. "*I will be generous and assume one of you has a very good reason for ignoring my orders. Well?*"

Potter leapt to his feet. "It was my fault!" the boy gasped out before Nagini could respond. "Nagini was – provoking me – said that I – that I didn't deserve you. It was my fault." He paused to take a deep breath. "It's been an awful day, and I – lost my temper. I'm... I'm sorry."

Voldemort stared at Potter, who was now gazing down dejectedly at the once-more pristine carpet. Nagini slithered behind Voldemort, still snapping angrily at Potter. "*He lies! He lies!*"

"*Silence, my pet. I am certain Harry's contrition is sincere.*" The Dark Lord put a single white finger to the boy's chin. "There shall be no further discord between you and Nagini. If you take issue with her behaviour, you will come to me and *I* will deal with it - is that understood?"

"Yes – of course – sure," Harry breathed, looking very grateful, and then added with a sidelong glare at Nagini, "As long as she stops insisting you still plan to serve me up for dinner."

"*Nagini will mind her manners in future, I am sure.*" Voldemort replied, shooting his snake a sharp look of warning as he gave Harry's chin a last caress before walking out the door with Nagini and Potter at his heels. Ignoring them both, he began to trace the cold air with his wand. The sky was darkening and light snow was falling. Complex runes began to appear beneath the melting snow. Voldemort spun and whirled - gesturing gracefully - his mind intent. Symbols and numbers

gleamed, flickering like blue fire in the steaming snow - magic turning about the Dark Lord like the numerals of an unknown dial.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Potter watching him, squinting warily from the doorway. "Er – I don't suppose you're going to tell me what you're doing...?"

"Is it not obvious?" Voldemort replied distractedly, finishing off the necessary calculations.

"Oh, yes, of course," Potter said dryly. "I just didn't see how a giant clock in the snow would be of much use to us right now."

"A clock?" Voldemort raised his hairless brows in surprise, red eyes blinking at Harry as the boy's comment threw his focus. "I am preparing an encircled pentacle for transhemispheric apparition."

"Um..." Harry stared at him for a moment, frowning, and then began to nod emphatically, as though in understanding. "Oh! Oh yeah, obviously, of course. I mean – everyone knows that a trans-circle pentagon is very good at – er – melting a lot of snow. I'm – glad you thought of it! I mean... there is clearly too much snow out here."

Lord Voldemort stared at Harry. Could this be some juvenile attempt at ridicule - was the boy making fun of him? Then he remembered that Potter was a sixteen year old who appeared to spend most of his free time talking to his foolish Gryffindor companions and playing Quidditch. "Commonly there is only a certain distance it is possible for wizards to apparate," he began slowly. "Most solve this problem by employing more unwieldy methods of travel." He glanced at Potter's broomstick. "However, with the proper preparations - such as those you see before you - a truly powerful wizard may cross the globe without any ill effects. You did say you wished to go far away, did you not?"

"Oh, well – yes, I just hadn't realized we'd be... Apparating," Potter said weakly, looking distinctly green in the face. "I – I've got my broom, though! Can't I just... fly and meet you there?"

"Harry, I believe Professor Dumbledore might disapprove of my allowing you to fly across the world by yourself, no matter the quality of your broomstick."

"Across the world?" Potter's eyes grew wide with excitement, apprehension apparently forgotten in the face of an adventure. "We're – really leaving the country, then? Where are we going?"

Voldemort's thin mouth stretched into an almost-smile. "Telling you would spoil the surprise, my precious one. Suffice it to say that it would take weeks travelling by broom, not to mention being highly uncomfortable." The crimson gaze softened. "I have done these equations many times. It is quite safe, I assure you." A spidery hand ruffled messy, black hair.

"Well... all right," the boy conceded. "But I get to pick how we get there next time."

"*Come, Nagini!*" Voldemort called to his snake, who had been coiled in the manor's doorway, unwilling to brave the chill. Hissing displeasure, she slid into the snow towards the Dark Lord, wrapping her bulk obediently across his shoulders and around his waist, fixing Harry with what Voldemort suspected were smug glances with her yellow eyes.

He took the boy's warm fingers in his own and moved back to the centre of the glittering blue pentagram. The snow was deepening around the symbols Voldemort's magic had carved and the sky was a freezing blur of falling white. "Place your hands around my neck, my brave Gryffindor, and *do not let go* until we reach our destination."

Harry wound his arms obediently around Voldemort's shoulders, locking his hands behind his neck, and squeezed shut his eyes. "Right. Here we go."

Voldemort closed his eyes and tilted his gaunt face to the pale sky as his magic grasped for Harry and Nagini - anchoring them fast. In the darkness of his mind's eye both were Voldemort incarnate: a dark-haired young man filled with life's terrified excitement and a coldly expectant slit-eyed serpent. It hurt. There was familiar pleasure in their triumvirate, but also the ache of being drawn in two directions even as he revelled in such closeness.

The skin at the edges of his smooth eyelids folded over dark veins in effort, as the Dark Lord reduced the three of them to something less than physical - an entwined smoke of limbs and coils which *snapped* and fell -

(through a crack in the universe which *pressed* them together through a narrowing choke of blue flame - a mad collision of self sucked jagged - bleeding together and shrinking into light; tightly broken Nehebkaui: a hair-hairless jumble of boy-man-snake-soul plummeting into each others' seams *pulled*)

- apart on white sand. Voldemort stood in open mouthed agony, eyes shut. He tasted salty grit as Harry's face hit the dunes, and felt the heat that shimmered in Nagini's senses. Watering crimson cracked open and closed, blinded by sunlight glaring off the sea. He bowed his head, holding held himself tight against the phantom pains of his much-divided soul.

At first, Harry was sure he was dead.

Do not let go, Voldemort had said. A laughable concept now, really; that demonic clock thing had turned them all inside out and mashed their insides together and blended them in Aunt Petunia's KitchenAid 3000 on its highest setting. Harry wouldn't have been able to let go even if he *had* reacted to the pain, which had been enormous - surely somewhere up there between the Cruciatus and a slow, painful death by snake venom.

And now he was in some kind of human oven, otherwise known as hell. This somehow didn't come as a shock to Harry - it did, indeed, suddenly make sense he'd gone to hell. He had just been through a blender with a serial murderer, after all. Perhaps they'd mistaken Harry for Voldemort with the Dark Lord all mixed up inside of him now. And that wasn't even touching all of the other unholy things Harry had gotten up to with Lord Voldemort lately. Was there a special circle reserved for boy saviors who gave kisses to Dark Lords?

It was his sudden awareness of the Dark Lord in question - who was still lurking at the edge of Harry's consciousness, also in great pain - that drove Harry out of his fantasies of a doubtlessly tragic afterlife.

The boy opened his eyes, slowly. It was very bright, this place the portal of pain and suffering had taken them (probably not the underworld, then). There was also sand between his fingers, and - the boy spat - in his mouth, now that he was paying attention. A beach. Voldemort had taken them to a beach.

Harry sat up and looked around, feeling a little better now he was relatively sure they hadn't all exploded. This place looked oddly familiar, although Harry couldn't quite pinpoint to which memory the fine, white sand and frothing waves spoke. He pushed himself to his feet, brushing sand off a cloak that was much too heavy for the temperature, and his eyes immediately found Voldemort. He looked out of place, black robes stark against white, white sand and brilliant blue sky. From the way he was curled in on himself, Harry guessed

that he hadn't yet recovered from the natural conclusion that they'd been sent through a food processor and dumped on the devil's doorstep.

"We're not dead," Harry offered cheerfully, stumbling through the sand and toward the Dark Lord. There was sea salt on the breeze; Harry decided this wasn't all that bad after all. "It seems to have worked; not a snowflake in sight, is there?" He felt slightly hysterical with mirth. They had done it. They'd really done it. They'd left Britain. "I do hope this is where you meant to go, because I don't think you could convince me to do that again."

A pained, inarticulate hiss escaped the Dark Lord.

"Or maybe next time we'll just fly," Harry went on, oblivious. "It really isn't so bad - I think you'd really like Quidditch, there's a lot of strategy to it - and it wouldn't be so uncomfortable, Fred and George gave me a potion last year they said would, you know, numb things up down there, but I haven't given it a go yet - Ron said it's bound to do something horrible, but I want to be a good sport - er, are you all right?"

It occurred to him that the Dark Lord hadn't said a word since their arrival on the seashore. Harry frowned, suddenly noticing the way Voldemort was clutching at his face, eyes squeezed tight shut. Something like panic sparked within him; had something gone wrong in their journey? Was Voldemort injured?

"Hey," Harry said, touching the Dark Lord's arm, but the only reaction he got was an agonized intake of breath. "Hey, what's wrong?" A little desperately, Harry prodded at their connection - and jerked back, eyes squinting involuntarily. It was the light. The Dark Lord's mind was consumed by it. The sun was very bright here - Voldemort's eyes couldn't handle it.

Truly panicking now, Harry looked around the beach for anything that might help. There were no sunglass huts to be seen - no signs of civilization for miles, as far as he could tell - but there did seem to be a forest, set a little ways back on the dunes. Harry wrapped his arm around the Dark Lord's shoulders, guiding him up the beach and to the trees. "Hey, it's all right," he murmured soothingly, "there's some shade over there. C'mon."

It was a graceless stumble across the sand. Voldemort tried to watch the ground with Potter's eyes, but ended up tripping over his own feet.

Nagini couldn't help either - her thoughts would only confuse things more. The shame of his predicament burned in Voldemort's gut. He had thought the greyly overcast winter daylight an adequate test. But while his sight had been limited, it was nothing close to resembling this debilitating assault on his vision.

Potter set him down on some sandy scrub beneath the shadow of a tree. Voldemort still had to shade his face with his hands and cloak, but it was enough to distinguish vague shapes and colours. A red expanse rustled and blurred beside him as Harry pulled off his woollen jumper. Voldemort found it difficult to speak. He had worked very hard to conceal this weakness. Now Harry knew exactly how vulnerable he was in daylight. It had been foolish to come to this place when he could have taken them anywhere. The Dark Lord's pride smarted and he glowered at the indistinct brightness around him. In the clear light, his pupils had shrunk to pinpricks and his narrowed, scarlet eyes seemed almost pink.

It was pathetic. Voldemort sat hunched over on the ground, blinking with watery red eyes. "Hey, it's all right." Harry crouched beside him, dabbing gently at the wet skin around the Dark Lord's eyes with his jumper. "I could take off my glasses, if you'd like. Then we could be blind together." The boy touched the silky robe of Voldemort's shoulder - it really was quite hot, wasn't he sweltering under there? - and frowned. Harry had never seen a sorrier creature in his life. Unless he was counting that infantile, bleeding thing he'd found trembling under the armchair in that one dream.

"Hang on," said Harry suddenly, looking back over his shoulder at the shore they had left. "We've been here before." A smile spread across his face as it dawned on him. "This is that island, isn't it? The one with the sea snakes! That's the surprise!" He flopped down in the sand beside the scowling Dark Lord and beamed at him. "It's lovely. Really. Thank you."

Voldemort nodded silently, viciously wiping at his eyes, trying to stop them watering. But his sharp nails caught on the fragile skin, leaving angry scratch marks. At least the ghastly place had its intended effect on Harry. "I came here in the 50s when my... transformation was not so far advanced..." The cold words were huskily toneless and very quiet, almost drowned by the sounds of the birds and the sea.

"How about you shut your eyes?" Harry's voice was very small beside

him. "I can – I'll go wet my shirt. I'm sure the water is cool. That would feel nice, wouldn't it?"

Before Voldemort could respond, Harry was off, kicking up sand as he sprinted toward the shore.

"Harry-" Voldemort managed to rasp out as the boy came hurtling back to the tree and pressed the soaked jumper against his face. The cold material did soothe his closed, aching eyes somewhat even as the salt stung where he'd ripped his skin and sea water trickled down his flat face and into his slitted nostrils.

He wanted to scream at Potter that he absolutely *did not* need help, that he was *Lord Voldemort* and did not require assistance from the Boy-Who-Lived. He wanted to tell Potter that only a truly *incompetent* wizard would deluge someone's face in salt water instead of casting a simple Aguamenti Charm.

Instead he simply lay there - exhausted - reflecting that this was neither most painful nor the most embarrassing thing to befall him in the last few days. At least there was no one here but himself, Potter and Nagini. "That will do," he said eventually, pulling the soggy garment off his face without opening his eyes, and extending a pale hand in search of the boy. A sightless creature that might crawl up from some dark place - its luminous flesh exposed and defenceless in the sunlight it was never meant to see.

"I'm sorry about your eyes," Harry murmured as he leaned into the Dark Lord's embrace. "Maybe we can be nocturnal and only come out at night. Like owls."

The sodden wool of the jumper had saturated the front of Voldemort's robes, chilling his cold skin. He pulled the wet silk over his head and flung it away, leaving the Dark Lord naked from the waist up: all white flesh and long, jutting bones. "*Master?*" there was a soft hiss from across the sand, "*has the human hurt you?*" Nagini slid across Harry and curled her great body between them.

Harry, who had been busy trying not to gape at all the lovely new skin suddenly exposed to him, scowled at the snake intruding on their embrace. He was glad that Voldemort could not see very well in the sunlight; Harry could make all of the ugly faces he wanted to at Nagini and the Dark Lord would never know. He began to hiss fiercely that the scratches weren't his fault - Harry would never do anything to hurt Voldemort - when he noticed with surprise that the vicious red

marks previously marring the Dark Lord's pale face had vanished.

"Oh," said Harry, eyes wide. He touched Voldemort's cheek in wondering astonishment. His skin was so smooth and pale, it was as though it'd never been damaged. Harry's eyes wandered against his will, then, followed the curve of his gaunt cheek down the elegant column of his throat to a sharp collarbone, broad, creamy shoulders...

Another angry hiss from Nagini jerked the boy's attention back to her incursion. Harry glared furiously, cheeks pink. *"Shouldn't you be off chasing seagulls or something?"*

"Nagini must protect her Master from the wicked boy..." The snake spat, coiling protectively around Voldemort, who chuckled indulgently as he stroked her scales. Did he seriously think this was funny?

"Protect him?!" Harry was nearly spluttering with outrage. *"What's he got to be afraid of? Last I heard, you were certain he was going to be roasting me for dinner tonight!"* Harry folded his arms across his chest, frowning disapprovingly at Voldemort, who was enjoying this far too much. *"This is ridiculous. I hardly think I'm the wicked one here."* He forced his eyes away from the expanse of bare skin he never got to see, staring determinedly up at the sky with colored cheeks. *"Tell her I'm not wicked."*

"Tell her yourself," Voldemort replied as he continued to caress his serpent. "My soul has given you Parseltongue, has it not?" He paused, his pale fingers sliding affectionately across Nagini's head; Harry's stomach lurched. *"You both belong to each other as well as Lord Voldemort. Can you not feel it, Harry?"*

"Hmm, let's see... nope, can't say that I do," said Harry, crossing his arms and scowling. "Although I reckon I probably did *feel* something that had to do with her last night. Like maybe her fangs. Y'know, when she almost *killed me*."

"You had broken my wand and I was upset. You were an intruder and she acted in my defence." Voldemort held Nagini as the snake slid over his ribs to curl around his waist. The Dark Lord reached for Harry and gripped the boy's wrist, opening the channel between them and allowing Nagini to spill through -

(her life in the forest and the black possessor other animals avoided, the whispering egg within; when the rat hatched it from her and it broke forth: a raw, trembling thing - sick and helpless - her Master, her hatchling... yet she came from him, she was his and he was hers)

- and they were three. Nagini swayed, hissing in confusion, and Voldemort placed Harry's hand on her green scales.

Harry hardly realized he was back in his own mind again. He was too busy gaping at the snake around Voldemort's shoulders, lips parted in shock. "You came out of her egg?" he blurted out. "That's -" *Disgusting. Appalling. Infuriating.* He bit down on his tongue. She was practically Voldemort's mother, in a strange and deeply unsettling sort of way. He suddenly no longer knew how to feel about her. "So... it's because of her you came back to life." He finally looked back up at Voldemort. A hundred questions were flying through his head. "Why'd you decide to make her your Horcrux? Was it an accident - like me? Are there - others?"

Voldemort paused, wary of so many eager questions on this most private of subjects. "The methods I used to sustain the weak form I inhabited before my rebirth worked much better if the snake venom I imbibed also contained some of my own essence. While in that state it was also important that I keep a close watch on Pettigrew, which was often impossible with my own eyes, crippled creature that I was."

Voldemort sighed softly, his long fingers still gently brushing Harry's hand over the green scales. "Nagini became attached to me at a time when I had given up hope of ever regaining my powers. I was weaker than I have ever been and barely coherent when she came, unafraid, and spoke to me. Simple things. Birds' eggs, fish, and warm rocks. The dull minutiae of her animal existence. I possessed her, yes, but I was careful not to shorten her lifespan by too much. I have never needed companionship, yet..."

"Everyone needs companionship." Voldemort could feel Harry's warm fingers against Nagini's scales as the boy began to stroke her, hesitantly. "Who would you talk to when you're angry, or upset? Or when you've done something you're proud of? There's no use in being happy if you've no friends to share it with." He paused. "I'd - like to be your friend. If you'd let me."

Wanting happiness isn't weakness. You're only weak because you're afraid of it. Voldemort had tortured Harry for those impertinent words. And he was afraid. Harry was not an animal he could control. Talking to Nagini was a harmless indulgence. His conversations with Harry were dangerous. Harry was so very human. Harry could speak of what he had seen. Harry could betray him. Abandon him like his Death Eaters. He discovered very early that he did not want or need friends. No

matter what promises lay between them, the children ran crying to Mrs. Cole when they saw what truths lurked under Tom Riddle's skin. Then, of course, they had to be punished. Eventually Tom had taken care never to show the truth of himself to any of his so-called friends. And now that all pretence to innocence had fallen away, Lord Voldemort never expected to be asked to be anyone's friend.

"*My friend*," he tested the words silkily, facetiously on his forked tongue. "But I do not wish to be your friend, Harry. I wish to be *much more* than a friend..." The scant lips stretched into a wicked leer.

"Um, well, that's just, er... a different sort of friendship, isn't it?" Voldemort heard, rather than saw, the colour rushing to Harry's cheeks, and he imagined the boy looking away suddenly, delightfully affected. "I mean we'd, ah, still have to be friends to – er... wouldn't we? Just in a – a special way."

"Very special," Voldemort hissed softly, leaning blindly across Nagini to touch his flat nose to Harry's. The snake shifted between them but said nothing. The Dark Lord's serpentine tongue found the boy's ear. "*My most special and precious one...*" His nails slid down Harry's chest, tearing possessively at the cotton of his shirt.

A sharp intake of breath through dry, parted lips. "Sure, of - of course. We can be special friends, if... that's what you'd like." The boy squirmed restlessly against him. "I certainly don't do this with - any of my other friends."

"I hope not, Harry." Voldemort's eyes were closed as Nagini coiled around him: a swaying synergy of lord and serpent. The elevated pulse of the boy's blood excited Voldemort with a predatory fervour. His slitted nostrils flared and his thin gash of a mouth opened - along with Nagini's - to taste Harry's scent; their long, blue-black tongues quick-flicking up and down in strange unison as Voldemort's hands settled on Harry's shoulders like pale spiders.

He pushed the boy backwards into the sand, lying lazily atop him, his forked tongue still eagerly tasting the small space between them. "Because if you ever *did* do this with anyone else I should have to kill them and punish you *most severely*." The Dark Lord's high, soft voice carried a mixture of harsh demand and the alluring streak of playfulness Voldemort usually confined to torturous cruelties. His words were in English but Nagini echoed them eerily in Parseltongue as their minds and bodies entwined.

"Well – that's why I said we're special," the boy responded breathlessly, a frisson of fear rippling the air between them. "Because there's no one else. And you'd better not do this with anyone else, either," he added harshly.

Voldemort's mouth was a savage rictus. His sharp teeth and angular, inhuman face wordlessly ridiculed the idea that he would ever share such intimacies with anyone else. The Dark Lord's clawed fingers held Harry tight. The monstrous tongue slid lightly over warm, shivering skin. "There are precious few who would dare proffer themselves to Lord Voldemort," he confessed quietly, "and of those few, there is no one worthy of such liberties."

The idea of even his most faithful servants - Bellatrix or Bartemius - *touching* him was repulsive. He was their Dark Lord - their serpent god - and the only intimacy he granted was to kiss the hem of his robes and worship his power. He once delighted in using that impassable divide as an instrument of torturous control. Voldemort scorned all the world but himself. His voice was haughtily disparaging as his magic flared around him.

But something bitter dwelled at the corners of his mouth. That worshipful adoration had grown less and less over the years - replaced by simple terror of the sorcerer who held them in his sway. Dark Lord or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named: there was so little difference in the fearful voices of his servants and their victims - hateful, small creatures that they were. They thought he did not see their regret, their horror. Nothing escaped him. Nothing.

Harry felt his jealousy deteriorate in a rush of sadness. Voldemort had truly never known love, in any form. He had fashioned himself a monster. No one even wanted to approach him. What must it feel like to know that you repulse everyone around you? Harry couldn't imagine it was very nice. Was that why Voldemort had closed himself off, even to those who did "dare to proffer" themselves to him?

And yet Voldemort had not turned Harry away. Somehow, Harry Potter, the boy whom Voldemort had hated ferociously up until just a few short weeks ago, had proven worthy of the Dark Lord's attentions. Harry was beginning to realize just how precious any amount of Voldemort's trust was.

"Well, that's good, I suppose," Harry said slowly, "because I would have to, er, punish them too. Very severely." He raised a tentative

hand to brush against Voldemort's cheek, thumb running up his sharp jawline. "Besides, they don't know you. Not really." He smiled softly. "I think you're - quite likable, actually. Once you... get past all the killing and whatnot."

The ruby eyes cracked open: narrow, sanguine streaks as though someone had slit Voldemort's porcelain skin with surgical precision. He wanted to see Harry's face. Nagini could not discern subtleties of expression. He leaned into the boy's warm, inviting fingers - rubbing against the touch like a cat - and his squinting, feral gaze searched the blurry brightness for Harry's features. "Oh?" A soft hiss of disbelief.

"Well, of course I do! Why else would I have come along?" Harry offered him a smile, fingers tracing the Dark Lord's face. "You're very clever. Loads smarter than I'll ever be. I... really enjoy listening to you talk, even if I don't always understand everything you're saying. And you can be quite silly sometimes. I hadn't expected that. You're also - very kind to me. I... hadn't expected that, either." The boy stared thoughtfully up at the half-naked wizard atop him. "I suppose that I just enjoy being around you. When you're not torturing people, anyway. It's nice, even if we're only - I don't know, sitting on a couch, or chatting in that forest... I like being with you." He paused. "I... was always rather disappointed whenever I fell asleep and you weren't there."

I have always been able to charm those I needed. The cynical words rang false and discordant in Voldemort's mind. He had charmed Harry, it was true. But, more often than not, he had done just the opposite. Was he kind to Harry? He was certainly careful with Harry, Voldemort supposed. *I was always rather disappointed whenever I fell asleep and you weren't there.* He could not help but come to the conclusion that it was the boy who had charmed *him*. He felt just as wary and confused as Albus Dumbledore clearly had been when faced with such an unlikely trust.

"Do not allow your sentimentality to mistake me for something I am not, Harry." Voldemort warned.

Potter laughed. "You really think all that's not true? That it's about - sentimentality?" Voldemort would have given much to be able to see the boy's face - eyes - at that moment. "Honestly, I've got more reason to think badly of you than most people, and that's saying a lot. It must've taken a lot to prove to me otherwise." A thumb trailed gently across Voldemort's forehead. "You really have no faith in yourself, do

you?"

Voldemort's eyes went wide in angry surprise, "I have every faith in my abilities!" he hissed, causing Nagini to rise threateningly in response to his temper. The Dark Lord pulled blindly away from Harry as though scalded. Light flooded his gaze, causing the crimson eyes to blink back water. The one thing he had always possessed was the will to survive; enduring all that was necessary to achieve his goals. *I am Lord Voldemort.* That was his faith. That was his certainty. *He pities you,* a vicious voice whispered, *and why should he not when you behave like a weakling? A pathetic, warped old man. You cannot even see!*

A sickening sense of *déjà vu* came over him. Harry knew that expression - had seen it just before he had been tortured senseless beneath Voldemort's wand, tossed carelessly down cellar stairs that had haunted his nightmares ever since. Even though Harry knew there were probably no cellars on this particular island, he did not have any doubt that the Dark Lord would find somewhere dark and horrible to put him if the occasion arose. *I should have to punish you most severely.*

"Hang on - that's not what I meant!" Harry sat up, no longer trapped by Voldemort's relentless grip on his shoulders. "I wasn't talking about your abilities. You're - you're the most powerful wizard in the world... even more powerful than Dumbledore." The lie tasted dirty in his mouth - Dumbledore would always be more powerful, Harry believed this with all his heart - but the boy hardly missed a beat, determined and desperate. He touched the Dark Lord's bare shoulder, ignoring the frightening snake hissing and snapping in his direction.

"I was only trying to show you how much I - I care about you now." He hated how tiny his voice sounded. "You *are* likable, and clever, and kind. You are, and you haven't got a clue, that's all I meant. I only wanted to show you."

Voldemort shrieked and his long talons seized Harry with the unerring speed of a striking snake. *Show me!* He dove blindly into Harry's mind, trying to claw his way to the lie in Harry's mocking words. It was as blistering and cruel as it had been when he tried to possess the boy at the Ministry. He clung to Harry, grating out shallow, stuttering hisses of pain as the malignant voices chased him through his Horcrux's whirling thoughts.

The daylight, the sand, the pulse of the ocean - all of it fell away as

Voldemort's mind rammed violently against Harry's own. The boy cried out beneath the assault, struggling and thrashing in the Dark Lord's grip even as he fought back viciously with his own mind. For a moment, Harry almost believed that he had slipped into another nightmare - that he was lying not in a bed of sand, but thrashing across a floor littered with glass at Malfoy Manor as the Dark Lord's mind gave way beneath Harry's feverish counterattack.

It seemed inevitable - the further that Voldemort ripped and tore into his thoughts, the more deeply he became embedded in Harry's mind, the easier it was for Harry to push back at the invasion. And what he found in Voldemort's head was not reassuring.

Through a haze of pain, Harry saw his smile, meant to be soothing and kind, twisted into a cruel leer. And the voices - oh, the voices - it was *deafening*. Harry clawed at his ears, writhed in Voldemort's arms, but they refused to leave him, wrapped up in the Dark Lord's mind. It was enough to make anyone go mad. Humiliating taunts, egging the Dark Lord on - *urging* him forward -

LEAVE HIM ALONE! Harry's furious shout echoed through both of their heads. *He's not weak! You're MAKING him weak - by making him afraid of what's good for him! Well, I won't let you anymore! Leave him ALONE!*

Tom Riddle looked up. A boy was standing in the doorway, red-faced and out of breath, shimmering with brilliant magic. There was no light in the cellar and the sudden brightness of the open doorway *burned*. His silver-grey eyes blinked, hiding the tears. His legs still shook from being caned. "You aren't supposed to be here," he told the older boy quietly. "No one is allowed in here except me." He tilted his head curiously at the black-haired boy. "Why were you shouting? Shouting doesn't make them stop, you know."

Harry blinked, taken aback. He was no longer thrashing beneath Voldemort's iron claws; in fact, he seemed to have left the beach completely. The Gryffindor squinted into the dark room, trying to catch his breath. It stunk of dust and tears and loneliness - Harry knew the smell well, had grown up smothered by it in his cupboard - and there was a boy in there, trembling in the shadows. Harry got one good look at his face and felt his heart slice cleanly down the middle.

"I never was very good at following rules." Harry offered Tom Riddle a smile, tried to make it as reassuring as possible. "I'm sorry if I

surprised you. I've come to help. D'you mind if I come in?"

"I suppose," Tom replied, raising his eyebrows at the boy. "Though I can't imagine you'll last long." He shrugged, trying to seem indifferent. *Had the boy really come to help?* It seemed unlikely. "They don't like it when people talk to me."

Harry frowned. He crouched down, leaning on his knees with his forearms so that he matched the child's height. Riddle was already handsome, even at such a young age. The boy's grey eyes were just as captivating as their crimson counterparts. Staring at this sad little boy, Harry couldn't help but wonder what would have happened to Voldemort if he had decided not to split his soul and remained human. Where would the world have been today? Where would *Tom* have been?

"Who are *they*, Tom?" Harry asked, loading his gaze with urgency. "It's very important that you tell me. I can't help unless I can find whoever does this to you."

"I thought you *knew*?" Tom said disbelievingly. He glared furiously at the intruder. "They're not going to hurt me. They're going to hurt *you*!"

Then it came. A slithering, crawling susurrus of whispers. They were the walls and the floor and the ceiling. A creeping darkness of beady-eyed serpents. They hissed and seethed about Tom and Harry, wrapping about them and holding them fast like Devil's Snare. Their voices were high, merciless and cold, and they spoke living terror on the air. Deep and older than anything imaginable. Tom screamed.

Harry gripped Tom tight, holding him close as he began to shout, as the fear began to choke the air. "*Leave him alone*," Harry hissed at the creatures in trembling Parseltongue, but it was difficult to think - a child's wailing was filling the room, cruel laughter ringing in the floors, that same stink of loneliness and terror pressing down until it was suffocating.

"You musn't listen to them, Tom. You'll never be able to get out of here if you don't stop listening." The creatures were descending upon them, hissing words that Harry did not understand, things that seemed to be deeply disturbing to the child quaking in his arms. "Look at me - focus on *me* - they'll go away if we ignore them, and then we can leave. We can get out of here - together. Would you like that, Tom?"

The child shook his head fearfully, quivering in the arms of this strange older boy. "I - I don't need you!" Tom tried to push the boy

away. "I won't go! You can't make me!" The serpents coiled around his ankles and into his black hair as he struggled, sinking deeper into their whispering mass. "This is your fault!" He shrieked at the green-eyed boy, stumbling backwards through writhing shadows that wound up his trembling limbs. "Don't you see what you've done? Didn't I tell you it wasn't allowed?-"

And something coalesced behind them. A thousand tiny fears heaving into one livid, breathing darkness. The King of Serpents. Its eyes were gashed to blind, dripping crimson. Despite this, it moved with supreme ease through the morass of wriggling creatures, who retreated before its terrifying presence. Its hisses were soft and infinitely dangerous, yet it cooed at the weeping Tom like a comforting parent, ensnaring the boy in its heavy coils. Raising its tail, the Basilisk stroked Tom, and put its awful, flat, malignant face to the boy's cheek. Evil things spilled from its mouth, clotting the seething place with blood and death.

It raised its great head, nostrils flaring as it scented Harry. *"He does not need your help,"* it told the intruder quietly, with a voice that was Tom Riddle's grown icy and unnatural, as the small boy silently sobbed into its scales. *"I am Lord Voldemort. I have made him immortal, more powerful than any wizard alive, and given him a name that all fear to speak. What do you presume to offer this weak child that I cannot?"* One of the smaller snakes attempted to wriggle up Tom's arm, but the Basilisk silenced its whispers with vicious teeth.

Harry had backed himself all the way up against a wall, still boiling and hissing with writhing serpents. It was, for a few moments, very hard for him to think through his terror. There was a Basilisk - *a Basilisk!* - inside Voldemort's head. Harry felt all the horror of Slytherin's chamber crash over him again, a scab ripped open in his mind - he was twelve years old, he was running for his life from a monster more terrible than he had ever imagined, he was going to die. Voldemort was going to kill him.

And then he shook himself. He was not going to die, and certainly not by Voldemort's hand, even if he *was* dealing with an even more monstrous incarnation of the Dark Lord than usual. And as terrifying as this may be, he was only inside Voldemort's head. A half-remembered chapter from *Dream Warrior* came to mind as Harry studied the weeping child, the fearless, arrogant Basilisk. Something about the structure of the psyche projecting itself onto apparitions of the mindscape - but that bit had heavily referenced Sigmund Freud, and hadn't Voldemort told Harry to skim the bits involving Freud? He

couldn't remember, especially not now, with the bloody eyes of the Basilisk glaring at him expectantly for an answer.

Harry knew only one thing for sure - this creature was a poisonous presence in Voldemort's mind, and a very vocal one by the looks of it.

"He's not weak!" Harry's fists clenched at his sides, another echo of that horrible day at Malfoy Manor. "It isn't weak to be afraid, Tom. You need to *recognize* your fears - to take control of them, or else they'll only control you. What good is power, or immortality, or - or any of it, really, if your fear is enslaving you?" Harry looked at the trapped little boy, trying to catch his gaze with pleading eyes. "You've got to *listen* to me, Tom. Don't you want to see what's outside this horrible cellar? I can show you."

"I'm not! I'm not afraid!" Tom cried, but it was so blatantly untrue that the Basilisk laughed at the small boy and his foolish Gryffindor champion - a high, chilling sound. The coils grew tighter. Tom began to pant and keen as the giant snake began to suffocate him, crushing the air out of his lungs.

"No!" Harry dashed forward, but the slithering sea of serpents rose to block his path, preventing him from reaching the child - the sliver of humanity Voldemort still had left in his soul - who was gasping hoarsely in the Basilisk's tightening coils. Harry could not save him. Tom was going to have to do this himself. "Tom, it's *all right* to be afraid!" Harry urged. "You can't fight something that you won't even admit is there in the first place! You are Lord Voldemort, the Heir of Salazar Slytherin - you are the master of your own fears! You must look it in the eye and *fight back!*"

The older boy's voice came as though from a long way away. Tom desperately tried to push against the coils, but the more he fought the tighter they became. Words ran together in his frantic scramble but the boy - *Harry* - called to him, shining like a distant star. He wanted to go with him and escape this place. *Why was the Basilisk killing him? Wasn't it supposed to protect him? Didn't it lo-*

"HARRY!" he shrieked and broke free - the blind snake spitting furiously and snapping at his heels. Tom crashed into the older boy, bowling him over. They hit what should have been roiling floor and fell through the darkness: a messy jumble of limbs on stone. Tom hid his face in Harry's shirt, clinging to the boy as though his life depended on it. Ashamed of his tears but unwilling to let go.

The room shifted and blurred as Harry held tight to the boy in his arms, stroking his hair, rubbing his back. Relief and comfort chased away the terror lingering in the air as their thoughts merged and blended. They slipped from Lord Voldemort's mind into Harry's. There were no Basilisks or dusty cellars here. Harry murmured soothing words into dark, silky curls as Hogwarts' Great Hall materialized around them, empty of students and professors but still brimming with that wonderful sense of *home*.

"I'm very proud of you, Tom." The sobs of the trembling boy in Harry's lap seemed to finally be winding down. The shabby orphanage uniform Tom had been wearing was gone, replaced by handsome Hogwarts robes and a green and silver tie. Harry's fingers continued to card through the child's soft hair affectionately. "You've done it. We've got you out of there. Everything's going to be all right now."

Tom's sharp, gasping breaths seemed to hit the air with obscene noise. He was disgusted by his trembling, hyperventilating body that just *wouldn't stop*. He had to be strong for Harry. He had to make sure Harry wouldn't leave him. *He will abandon you...* The voice of the Basilisk ghosted up his spine as he buried his head in the older boy's shoulder.

Everything's going to be all right now. He felt naked, as though he'd fallen out of his skin. It was so different here. The edges of things didn't fade away into shadow. Nothing was... missing. His grey eyes were wide with wonder. It was so warm - warm with something foreign and unimaginable. For a moment, Tom's small face was transfixed with an almost bestial greed. "Could I stay here with you? I mean... are... are you going to adopt me, or...? Because it's nice here. It's so cold where I live and there are gaps. Things I can't remember... you... you probably don't want someone like me in a place like this... they wanted to have me looked at - *but I'm not mad! I'm not! I'll be good, I promise - I won't touch anything! Please let me stay!*"

It all rushed out in a manic wave of desperation which dissolved into pleading Parseltongue. Tom clamped his hand over his mouth in horror. Now there was no chance of Harry letting him stay.

Of all the things Harry might've expected to find in Voldemort's mind - Horcrux infants and angry spirits and horrible snakes - he hadn't for a moment thought he would encounter a terrified, lonely little boy. He honestly felt better equipped to handle Basilisks than small children, especially ones turning out to be so unpredictable as this one. Even at such a young age, Harry hadn't expected he'd find Tom to be so...

well... *human*. The Tom Riddle he'd encountered in the Chamber of Secrets had been cruel, calculating - light years away from this vulnerable boy with his quivering frown, overflowing with insecurities. Tom had been locked away in Voldemort's broken mind all this time. Harry's chest ached with the need to comfort him.

"Hey there - it's all right - I don't think you're mad. *Look, I can do it as well!*" Harry gave Tom an easy grin and gently pulled his small fingers away from where they covered his face. "Of course I want you to stay. I've been... looking for you, for a very long time. It's why I came and found you. You're not getting away from me *that* easily." He resisted the impulse to pull the younger boy into another tight embrace, wary of frightening him away. Instead, he grasped Tom's shoulders and looked very seriously into guarded grey eyes. "You're with me now, okay? You're safe. I won't leave you. Maybe we can fix up your home together, when you're feeling a little better. Would you like that? We can do whatever you'd like."

"Forgive me for interrupting such a charming scene, but I fear neither of you understands the complexities of your current predicament." A tall, dignified wizard, approaching the end of middle-age, sat across from Harry and Tom at the Gryffindor table. His plain, dark clothes were reminiscent of Professor Snape's teaching robes and - much like Remus Lupin - his glossy, black hair was streaked heavily with silver. Deep lines of suffering were etched into his face, yet his gaunt, pallid features still held traces of fine-boned, aristocratic beauty. Knowing, slit-pupilled, emerald eyes gazed at them over a pair of pince-nez which looked suspiciously like those worn by one of wizards who had taken Harry for his practical exams last year.

"Oh!" Tom gasped. The small boy's eyes went wide and he disappeared from under Harry's fingers with a crack, popping back into existence beside the wizard. A flush of excitement rose up his neck into his hollow cheeks as he seized the man's robes. A few autumn leaves had snagged on the black material and when his breath touched Tom's skin it was a draught of cold, October air. "I *remember* you!" Suddenly, the boy's face fell and he shuffled back warily, his arms falling to his sides. He balled his fists, glaring in accusation. "You're not the same, I thought-"

"All things change," the old wizard said in a soft, slightly hoarse tenor as his long fingers - wrinkled and arthritic like the Headmaster's - found Tom's chin. His thin lips grimaced as if at some painful memory. There was nothing kind about his gentle, rasping voice - but rather an infinite resignation. The haunted green eyes turned to the boy whose

mind they were in. "I belong with Harry now."

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck rose up in warning, and all traces of friendliness drained from his face. If this person was who Harry thought he was - and Harry didn't think he was wrong, Tom seemed to know him, too - then Harry did not want any part of Voldemort's mind standing anywhere near him. After all, the first and last time this man had made an appearance outside routine twitches in Harry's scar, he had been attempting to drive the Dark Lord from his own body. And here Voldemort was, his subconscious having apparently taken a brief holiday to Harry's side of the connection. Would he try again?

Harry scrambled to his feet - how was it that Voldemort could already perform greater magic than he could, even so young? - and stood cautiously behind Tom. His fingers itched to grab hold of the child's shoulders again, wanting to keep him safe and near. "That's right," Harry said, frowning and remembering his own words. "You belong with me." The itch won out; one of Harry's hands slipped comfortably onto Tom's shoulder. "But he does too, doesn't he? What d'you mean? I'm supposed to just - send him back *there* now? There's a Basilisk there! It was nearly killing him!"

"And if you do not return him to Lord Voldemort's mind then you will only succeed in finally accomplishing what Voldemort has been trying to do since childhood." The emerald eyes were full of wry sadness. "Trust me when I say that if the Basilisk had been able to kill this boy then it would have done so long ago."

Harry examined the green gaze, so eerily similar to his own, for any hint of deception. He found none. "Well, then we'll just have to kill the Basilisk," Harry said confidently, with as much bravery as he could muster. He gave Tom's shoulder what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. "I've killed a Basilisk before. It - wasn't so hard." He decided it might be best not to mention to Tom he'd had an ancient magical sword and a phoenix with healing powers to help him in this endeavour. And especially the bit about his almost dying. That probably wouldn't inspire a whole lot of courage. He looked back up at the Horcrux, trying not to seem nervous. "This one... can be killed, can't it?"

"You are speaking of destroying the dominant aspect of Voldemort's remaining psyche." The Horcrux rasped. "Theoretically, such a thing may be possible, given the advantage you and I have over him, but I cannot answer for the consequences, Harry."

"I'm not going back!" Tom yelled, clutching Harry in panic. "Don't let him send me back!"

"It's all right, Tom," Harry said, but he felt nauseous with guilt. Voldemort's mind was already so torn apart; there was no telling what another loss might do to it. Tom would need to go back after all, then. Harry knelt down beside the terrified child, taking his small hands in his own. "So we can't destroy it. But I can teach you how to scare it away. We'll make it so scared that it'll never come looking for you again."

He touched Tom's curls, a comforting gesture more practiced on a hairless head. "You can't fight what you don't understand, remember? That's why it's important to understand your fears. Well, you know something that Basilisk won't ever understand." He paused. "Do you know what that is, Tom?"

Tom shook his head, curling up on himself. "It's not afraid like me. It's so powerful and it... it eats things. Things it doesn't like. And I never see them again." He looked on the verge of fresh tears. "It said it would keep me safe but it *lied*... it just takes things away...!" He gave a pitiful wail and pulled away from Harry, hugging himself with white knuckles.

An unexpected weight on Harry's shoulder - coupled with the departure of Tom from the circle of his arms - made Harry look up in surprise. Green eyes with thin, serpentine pupils looked back at him, a familiar but strange amalgamation of Harry and a human Voldemort. There was something comforting in his touch, a piece of himself returned to him that Harry hadn't realized had been missing. Perhaps the Horcrux really had belonged here all along.

"Everyone is afraid of something, Tom," Harry said gently, turning back to a younger Tom Riddle and staring into his shining grey eyes. "Even Basilisks. You know what I'm talking about. You do. I saw you escape from it before, and it was because you scared it off." He reached forward and touched the younger boy's arm, the Horcrux's hand still grasping his own shoulder. A ghost of the connection rippled through Harry's body. "Tell me what you were thinking about."

"I... I don't know..." Tom bit his lip, looking at the floor. He remembered when the Basilisk was small. It found Tom when no one else had cared and whispered things to him in the dark. It promised it would punish anyone who hurt him - that he wouldn't need to be afraid. But, as its coils grew and it got colder and colder in Tom's

cellar, fear was all there was. "It's scared of you," Tom muttered eventually. "It's always been scared of you... it *hates* you. Except now it can't kill you so it's trying to control you... a-and when it goes wrong it *always blames me*..."

"It's scared of me because I've been looking for you," Harry said quietly. "I don't want you trapped in that room anymore, and it knows that. And whenever I come close to getting you out..."

He looked down, memories flashing before his inner eye: Voldemort yanking away from him at Malfoy Manor, in the sand just a few moments before - *weakness, you're weak*.

"It's trying to make you afraid of me. Only that it's the thing you really need to be afraid of, isn't it? Once you see that - once you *believe* that, truly, in your heart - it's not going to be able to touch you, Tom. I promise." Emotion welled in his chest, so intense and unexpected that it hurt. "I would never do anything to hurt you. Never. There's no reason to be scared of me, right?"

Tom looked up, miserable. "You're lying. You're going to make me go back, aren't you? The Basilisk was right. You... you don't care about me at all! *Tell the truth!*" The last three words were a thunderous command which seemed to emanate from the walls of the Great Hall. The serpent reaching through into Harry's mind, turning Tom's wet eyes a glittering scarlet.

"Shhh..." The Horcrux knelt beside the small boy, his soft whispers strangely similar to those of the Basilisk. An eerie grandfather settling long, old fingers on Tom's cheek. "I know it hurts to return, but Harry loves you. I promise. He told me to give you this." The old wizard reached into his cloak - which rustled like dead leaves - and brought out a thick woollen jumper in bright Gryffindor red, with a "T" for Tom on the front. "What do you think of that?"

"It's... it's really for me?" Tom said in a very small, disbelieving voice.

Harry, meanwhile, was struggling to keep his balance. He wasn't sure if he'd heard correctly. *Harry loves you*. The Horcrux had just told Tom that Harry loved him, as though it were a trivial fact, taken for granted, like the weather or the day of the week. Love. Harry's chest constricted, suddenly too small for his heart, swollen and waterlogged in his ribcage. Dumbledore had said that Voldemort didn't understand love. Voldemort had shattered his soul with Dark magic - Harry could see that now more than ever, with two pieces of Voldemort's soul

standing right in front of him. Harry had even heard Voldemort dismiss the notion of love as foolish and irrelevant, warn Harry not to bring up the subject around him.

An unfamiliar bitterness settled over his thoughts. Could Harry love someone who refused to love him in return? How dare this foreign piece of magic presume to tell anyone - least of all Voldemort - how Harry felt? Had Voldemort known what was going on in Harry's mind right now, the Dark Lord would surely be mocking him ruthlessly for even contemplating such a ridiculous idea. Harry's swollen heart gave a painful twist at the thought.

But then Harry caught the look on Tom's face, and his burning denial of his love for this small boy with his sad, hopeful eyes gave way almost immediately. Tom was not Voldemort, with his cruel outbursts and his hurtful words. Tom was not the Basilisk. It was okay to love Tom.

"Yes. Just for you," Harry said, hardly missing a beat. "I have one just like it - it says 'H,' for my name, of course. I'd - I'd like you to wear this when you go back home. This way, the Basilisk will know that I'm watching over you. That... I love you. And that you aren't afraid of him anymore."

It was okay to love Tom. Harry's acceptance of this seemed to lift a weight from his shoulders, one he hadn't known existed in the first place. Maybe Harry had already been loving him all along.

The small boy blinked tearful eyes back to grey as he looked at them. Then he greedily snatched the jumper off the Horcrux - as though afraid the gift would vanish at any moment - and rammed it on over his school robes. There were a few seconds of Tom Riddle versus red jumper and then he leapt into Harry's arms, with his proud new possession on backwards, its long sleeves hanging down over his hands.

And was gone.

The old Horcrux got slowly up off the floor, his knees aching. He was still becoming used to a world without agony. Now, he would not swap places with Lord Voldemort for anything. Grown ancient with torture, he was content to at last exist as something more than a ripped, unwanted thing never to heal. His fragile bones were slowly mending within Harry's unbroken soul. No longer Tom Riddle or Lord Voldemort but not quite Harry Potter either. He did not know what he

was. And he did not particularly care as he settled himself on the bench. He was home.

The space in Harry's arms felt empty and strange without Tom in them. He knelt there on the floor for a moment, remembering the happiness shining in those eyes before they had vanished. Tom had gone back where he belonged. And perhaps... perhaps he would be a little better off now.

Harry glanced up at a rustle of movement. The Horcrux had seated himself on the bench. He looked very familiar in a comfortable sort of way, now that Harry was looking with a less hostile eye. A collection of bits and memories floating around Harry's mind, patched into this person who still held some traces of Tom Riddle in his face. Harry followed the older man to the Gryffindor table, sitting quietly beside him.

"Thanks," the teenager said after a long moment. He looked up nervously. "I was - very glad to have you with me. He can be a bit, er, complicated to handle sometimes."

The Horcrux smiled knowingly and nodded. "Professor Dumbledore is perhaps overly fond of discussing the power of love. He does not appear to realise that it is possible to be born without that which allows a person to give and receive such things. Aware that you are missing something which all those around you possess, but unable to understand what it might be. Do you recall Professor Slughorn's lesson on Amortentia, Harry?"

Harry's swollen heart chose that moment to remind him that it was still too big for his chest. Voldemort had been born without the ability to love. His face fell. "Yeah," he said quietly. "The love potion, I remember. I smelled broomstick polish, and... treacle tart." He looked up at the Horcrux, suddenly curious. "Did you have that lesson as well?"

"Yes," the Horcrux murmured quietly, "to me the potion had no scent whatsoever. Which, coupled with what we learned from Dumbledore about my... about Merope Gaunt, has led me to some interesting conclusions." The old wizard took off his pince-nez and sighed. "As you know, Amortentia cannot create love - no potion can. In fact, it actively suppresses any emotions its victim might feel, all the while inducing overwhelming, single-minded obsession. People under the influence of such a powerful potion as Amortentia will feel nothing at all for those things they previously may have cherished, and thus -

according to Dagworth-Granger's theory - are the only people who would be unable to smell anything if you offered them the potion." The old wizard looked strained, his hoarse tenor melancholy. "Apart from, perhaps, someone conceived by such means."

"So Voldemort can't love." Harry looked at his lap, miserable. Even the part of Voldemort that was still innocent and sweet - the part that had just run back to the Dark Lord's mind wearing Harry's red jumper - couldn't love. The way he'd been born made it impossible for him too. He could only obsess - and this made a whole lot of sense, now that Harry thought about it. Voldemort had obsessed over killing him for years, and now that he'd learned Harry was a Horcrux, the obsession had simply adjusted to fit the circumstances Harry wasn't helping him love. Nothing had really changed at all.

"But - but it's more than an obsession," Harry said, his voice small and desperate. "He said that I make him feel happy sometimes. Through our connection. I thought I was helping him."

"You *are*." The Horcrux gripped Harry's shoulders in much the same way that the Gryffindor had held Tom a few minutes ago. There was something of Tom's wild, feverish excitement glittering in the emerald eyes of the Horcrux as he held Harry close, yet it was marred by terrible memories of anguish. Bright green light and pain beyond imagining. Unwanted and broken. The hoarse voice trembled.

"Because... through a strange accident of fate, *you* are part of Lord Voldemort - bound in s-soul and blood. *And what is in your blood, Harry?*"

"Love." The answer came without hesitation, some of the Horcrux's contagious anticipation seeping into Harry's own voice. "Dumbledore's always said that - my blood has the protection of my mother's love!" Harry's mind spun with the possibility of it. "Voldemort used my blood when he came back to life. So even though he's been born without the ability to love, because of the Amortentia... the protection my mum gave me has made him able to now?" Hope stirred in his chest, making his heart lurch, his breath catch.

"I believe it has... opened up the possibility. But do not forget that we still have a Basilisk by the tail. One that has been fed on a diet of fear, madness and death for almost seventy years. I can only see what he is because I am *you* now. You completed the ritual. And you need not worry - I would not change places with him for all the world." He gave Harry's forehead a chaste kiss. His emerald eyes and silver-black hair made him seem almost like a fond, elderly relative.

The Horcrux's lips felt warm against his face. Harry sighed and leaned into the gentle touch. This version of Voldemort was remarkably easier to talk to than the real thing. Perhaps this would be what Voldemort would have been like had his soul not languished for so many years in his dark and broken mind. He found himself suddenly grateful for the Horcrux's presence. Harry would not have nearly as much insight into Voldemort's soul without its help - both literally and figuratively.

"I'm glad you think so," Harry said with a soft smile. "I hope you like it here. It must have been - difficult, being ripped away like that after living in Voldemort's body for so long." He frowned thoughtfully. "Though I don't remember performing any rituals."

Not all rituals require incantations and Arithmantic equations...

The words were like the trailing tail of a dream.

Long, white fingers were stroking Harry's cheek and narrowed crimson eyes were staring at him intently. The sea had vanished. He lay on a large bed in a dingy, musty room. There were old books piled everywhere and ghastly, peeling dark green and mustard yellow wallpaper. The place looked almost as bad as Borgin and Burkes - bizarre, exotic artefacts were hung on the walls or sitting amongst the piles of books. The blankets covering the bed were woven with strange tribal symbols and something which looked like the Dark Arts version of a Muggle dream-catcher - woven with jewels, bird skulls and black feathers was hanging ominously above Harry's head.

"You are finally awake, it seems." Voldemort stated. His flat face and soft, cold voice were completely without expression.

"Er, yeah." Harry stared at the Dark Lord, at a loss for words. Even after dealing with so many different incarnations of Lord Voldemort, he found he suddenly didn't know what to say now that he was faced with the sum total. Had Voldemort experienced any of what had just happened? Was there a little boy watching him from behind crimson eyes, and would he have the strength to fight the Basilisk upon its inevitable return?

Inexplicably nervous, Harry looked about the strange, dark room in which he'd awoken. It was a far cry from the peaceful beach; Harry already missed the soothing rhythm of the sea against the shore. "Are... you all right?" He looked cautiously back at Voldemort. "I was... quite worried about you. I never meant to, er -" *force my way into your*

mind again, his mind supplied unhelpfully "- make you so upset."

Lord Voldemort very much did not wish to discuss what had happened. He had woken in stark sunlight as the shade of the tree had shifted and no amount of spells had woken Harry, who seemed to have retreated to his own mind. Yet, despite the awful light and the agonising migraine that made his senses swim, the Dark Lord had felt clearer, *colder* than he had in weeks. "You need not concern yourself. I am slowly becoming accustomed to losing consciousness. This makes the second time for both of us in the last twenty-four hours, does it not?"

Sadly, such wonderful clarity of thought had not lasted long. With the aid of Nagini's eyes and tongue, Voldemort had managed to levitate Harry and summon them shelter. It was all very well to say you could perform highly advanced dimensional charmwork with your eyes closed, but doing so in baking heat with pain corkscrewing into your skull was something of a challenge. Still, he had succeeded in establishing a temporal bridge between his old, windowless attic rooms in Knockturn Alley and the skeleton of a hut Nagini had found.

Voldemort had long ago warded up the place with the Fidelius Charm so that it could no longer be accessed from its physical location in London. It had proven very useful during his travels, as he had distrusted and disliked interacting with all the wizards and Muggles who had insisted upon treating him like a tourist whenever he stayed in more conventional accommodations.

The silence stretched on and Voldemort turned away from Potter and continued unpacking.

Harry sat up in bed, thinking dryly that passing out more often sure didn't make it any less unpleasant. Voldemort did not seem in the mood for conversation, though, so Harry kept this thought to himself and let the silence settle as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, taking in the room. It looked as though it hadn't been touched in years. Perhaps Voldemort had found this place abandoned on the island after all; certainly if the Dark Lord had decided to bring them somewhere off the beach, he would have taken them somewhere a little less, well, musty.

And a little less creepy too, while he was at it. When it was clear Voldemort wasn't paying him any attention, Harry got up off the bed to explore the small room with all its morbid decorations, trying to

figure out where they were. The sinister artifacts scattered about the room didn't look like they'd originated from any island Harry knew of, at least from his limited knowledge of other cultures. The room's rather questionable decor seemed to come from all across the world. There was a disturbing bird mask that looked like it was from Ancient Egypt hanging on one wall, and right beside that was a great curved knife with Chinese characters etched into the hilt. And then there was the thing with the small skulls hanging from the ceiling. Harry couldn't even guess where that was from.

Well, if this was where they were going to be staying, he might as well unpack too. The boy pulled his shrunken trunk from the pocket of his cloak - folded neatly at the end of the bed - and enlarged it in just one go, and without overdoing any of the socks. Harry tried to ignore the pit in his stomach when he remembered he wouldn't be able to gloat to Ron about this. Taking a deep breath, he began to unpack his own belongings and place them tastefully about the dark room, trying to make it a little more Harry-friendly.

"D'you reckon one of those... silly Dark wizards without very much magical ability used to live here?" Harry was in the middle of considering whether to put his cherished chocolate frog card collection on a shelf beside what seemed like an unassuming black box, but decided against it when staring at it for too long produced a very unpleasant stinging sensation behind his eyes. "Judging from all the, er, you know. Hexed detritus."

Voldemort had been hanging the silver-edged mirror. His livid eyes went wide and he almost dropped the glass in shock. In the mirror, another Harry smiled winningly at him - all wild black hair and creamy nakedness. Red mist seeped into his mind and pinpricks of Dark magic began dancing up his left arm in anticipation. He clenched his lean fingers, nailing biting into his palms. He was not going to torture the boy, he was *not* going to torture the boy - (*visions of the boy at unnatural angles, bloody froth dripping from a mouth too hoarse to scream*) - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10... He finished hanging the mirror, ensuring it was straight. "I assure you, Harry, that everything here has a practical application." His high, sinister voice was glacial.

"Oh." Harry looked curiously over his shoulder at the Dark Lord. He had expected Voldemort to be happy he'd retained anything at all from that particular lecture. But Voldemort was standing very still, not looking at him. Frowning, the Gryffindor set his chocolate frog cards

down on the shelf (against his better judgment) and padded over to Voldemort's side.

"Well... I think it's a very nice place to stay," Harry said bravely. He touched the Dark Lord's arm. "It's certainly a lot less bright. Are your eyes feeling any better? I thought we-"

The words stopped in his throat as he caught sight of the mirror. His mouth dropped open and he stared. Tom Riddle - not the young boy, but a middle-aged adult, grown up and healthy – was standing inside, a huge smile on his face, without a care in the world. There was no scarlet in his eyes, and Harry could bet that there weren't any terrible creatures lurking inside his mind, feeding off of madness and rage. It was Voldemort without having grown up in that awful room, Voldemort without a Basilisk strangling any impulses of good nature his entire childhood. Harry's arms were slung around his shoulders, and as Harry watched, Riddle turned his head and whispered something in his ear. They both laughed behind the glass, and then Tom was kissing him, and Harry had to look away from the mirror, cheeks a little pink.

"What is this?" Harry's voice was very soft and confused. He had no idea why Voldemort would want a mirror with a depiction of a human Tom Riddle inside.

"A mirror of desire. I enchanted it myself in order to ensure I learned from my failure with the Philosopher's Stone. As, indeed, I enchanted almost everything in this room. Only by attempting to replicate the magic practised by other cultures it is possible to truly understand and then surpass them. My *tsantsa* is hanging in the other room. Would you like to see it? I confess, my favourite part of the ritual was throwing the skull into the river as a gift for the anacondas." The isolated Jivaroan tribe he had stayed with had practised some of the most powerful Dark Arts Voldemort had ever seen. The channelling of the *tsarutama* involved paralysing the victim's soul inside his head and then - once one had acquired the power of the victim's spirit - destroying the soul by slowly shrinking the receptacle in which it was preserved. The gleaming crimson eyes glazed over for a moment as the Dark Lord fantasised about inflicting such a fate upon Albus Dumbledore.

"Erm – that's fine. Another time, perhaps." The boy looked back at the mirror, clearly desperate to change the subject. "So... it's like the Mirror of Erised? What do you see?"

Voldemort gazed at the communion of etiolated white flesh and youthful, infinitely warm beauty wound about with smooth scales. Possessed and possessing in turn. Emerald and ruby glittering like jewels. The serpentine nostrils quivered. "I... see myself more powerful than any wizard has ever been. Omnipotent and immortal."

Harry looked sadly back at the mirror. It was strange - and a little disappointing - that he didn't see his parents in there anymore. "Oh. That's - a very nice wish." The Tom Riddle in the glass gave Harry's counterpart another smiling kiss. They both looked so happy. Harry's heart sunk; if it was only a mirror of desire, there was no guarantee that the vision it showed him would ever come true. And considering the Dark Lord's answer - power and immortality - Harry's vision was looking very unlikely, no matter what the Horcrux told him in the safety of his mind. *It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.* Harry looked away, miserable.

"You do not seem very pleased by what you see," Voldemort observed, looking down at Harry curiously.

Harry took another glance at the mirror and flushed. "No - that isn't it, I just -" He swallowed and looked back at the Dark Lord. There was muted pain in his green eyes as he examined Voldemort's face. "I just suppose I'm afraid it's not going to come true. At least you've already gotten your wish." Harry suppressed a sigh and tried to smile, longing to change the topic again. "But life's not very much fun if you've got everything you want, is it? Downright boring, that would be."

I have not, my treasure. "The only worthy goals are those which transcend the common realms of possibility." Voldemort leaned down and put his scant mouth to Harry's, suddenly moved by the boy's resignation. Perhaps he was wrong in judging Harry's ambitions to be so small. All his Horcrux needed was encouragement. "I say it would be boring not to try," his gentle voice whispered as Voldemort brushed light kisses across Harry's lips.

"Yeah, I know - impossibility is just a challenge to you." Harry smiled up into the fleeting kisses. But his happiness lasted only a moment. The boy leaned his forehead against Voldemort's with a sigh, looking into his eyes with a quiet desperation. "But what if the consequences of failure are - devastating? What if you don't even know where to start?"

"Harry, what do you imagine will happen to me should I fail?"

Agonising death and *damnatio memoriae*. A sentence the Wizengamot only passes on the darkest of wizards. They are to be expunged from the records of history, reviled in silence until future generations no longer recall the name of the sorcerer so condemned. The higher you reach the more devastating the consequences of failure will be. But one must be ready to risk all upon the altar of such ambitions." Voldemort chuckled. "It is something the greatest Gryffindors and Slytherins have in common."

"Well, I don't think you need to worry about failing anytime soon." Harry smiled playfully up at the Dark Lord. "After all, you'd have to kill me first. And I've heard that isn't an easy job."

Voldemort threw his head back and laughed: high, cold laughter which might more usually accompany someone's imminent death. The lipless mouth stretched into a wide grin, revealing the Dark Lord's sharp teeth and forked tongue. "Is that so?" he murmured, matching Harry's playful tone. Amusement gleamed bright in his scarlet eyes.

"I'm not sure - perhaps we should ask the expert." Harry cleared his throat, grinning impishly from ear to ear. "Lord Voldemort, on a scale of one to ten, how difficult would you rate the task of killing Harry Potter?"

"Next to impossible... an eleven at the least." Voldemort's smile grew taut and wicked as one spidery hand pushed the boy backwards onto the bed. "*However*, there are a variety of *other things* it may be possible for Lord Voldemort to do to Harry Potter instead..." The slitted nostrils flared with excitement as the Dark Lord leaned over the now supine Horcrux.

Harry's breath caught audibly. He pushed himself quickly to his elbows. "Is... that so?" he echoed breathlessly.

"Oh yes..." The hiss lingered in the air as Voldemort gazed down at Harry avidly. The Dark Lord was still wearing only a pair of loose, almost oriental trousers of the same silky black material as his robes, tied with a sash at his rail-thin waist. He mirrored Harry, whetting his lipless mouth in anticipation.

Then he pounced. Long, wasted limbs and large, clawed hands and feet made him seem almost like a young cat. His gleaming scarlet eyes - with their slitted, feline pupils - were wide with the blankly hypnotized intensity of a kitten. Voldemort was a tangle of possessive nips and scratches which nevertheless still held traces of warm, eager

breath and the physical innocence of a mind more used to giving pain than pleasure.

The edges of Voldemort's movements were lined with a sharp immediacy that was unfamiliar and jarring to Harry. The long nails dragging down the insides of his arms left vivid red lines on his pale skin; the sting of sharp teeth grazing against his wildly fluttering pulse point made Harry gasp with surprise. This was no dream, where the Dark Lord's touches were softened by their sleeping minds, ghosts of sensations that Harry had never experienced. It was real and urgent and wild, intense in a way a dream could never be.

Harry pressed hot kisses against Voldemort's face and throat, clinging to the naked torso above him; his nails dug ruthlessly into Voldemort's shoulder blades. He tried to think that he was giving as good as he was getting, rather than hanging on for dear life - but this wasn't a dream, and Harry didn't think he was fooling anyone. "You seem - quite certain," the boy teased breathlessly. He grinned at the Dark Lord, a challenge glinting in green eyes. "What makes you so sure these - other things - will be so much easier to accomplish?"

Voldemort trapped Harry's limbs beneath his own. His skin was warm from where the boy had scratched him; an itchy, greedy pulse in his flesh. He recalled his most visceral fantasies of murdering this boy, seeded in the lurid imagination of a brutal forest: all torn flesh and scarlet innards. He saw Harry opened up under him. A pretty, glass-eyed carcass whose lips suddenly moved: *What makes you so sure these - other things - will be so much easier to accomplish?* Words. Insignificant when compared with the sensations sparking between him and the boy's warm Horcrux-flesh.

The Dark Lord paused, still holding Harry down, trapping him against the mattress with the thoughtless impulse of a predator. The crimson eyes blinked out of their trance. His smoothly hairless brows rose and it took a moment for Voldemort to come back to speech. "I will... stop, if that is what you wish?" Shorn of play, the words were naked and unworldly; the high voice betraying cold surprise.

The playful grin on Harry's face faded beneath his puzzlement. "... What? No!" An embarrassed flush rose high on his cheekbones. "I was only teasing! You've - you've always teased me - and I thought you knew how much I-" Voldemort stared at Harry: flushed and trembling beneath the Dark Lord, teeth pulling at his lip nervously. The famous

glasses were slightly askew. "It was only a joke. A bad one. I - thought you already knew. Never mind. Forget I said anything."

"Very well." All had seemed easy in their minds. Yet this was perhaps not quite so awkward as the intimacy they had shared in Rookwood's house.

Lord Voldemort had a sense that both he and Harry knew they were skirting the edge of a precipice from which there would be no return. *What if the consequences of failure are devastating? What if you don't even know where to start?* Harry's words returned to the Dark Lord in a new light.

The pale, spidery hands reached out and slowly removed the boy's glasses, setting them carefully aside. Dark lashes and young, emerald eyes flicked searchingly up at him. A single white finger pressed against Harry's lower lip, accompanied by a serpentine hiss for silence. Voldemort reached into those green depths and drew Harry out to see himself with crimson clarity. Then he lowered his head and began to kiss and stoke with meticulous tenderness.

When Voldemort's fingers came for his spectacles, Harry's entire body went rigid with instinctual panic. Harry was *never* without his glasses. His eyesight was worse than poor - he couldn't make out a thing, even when squinting, rendering him a helpless, sitting duck. His glasses quickly became his most prized possession as a child - one of the few things that truly belonged to him, and easily the most necessary. Once, when he was nine, Harry had carelessly left them on a shelf in the bathroom and found them mysteriously broken in two the next morning after Dudley had been through the loo. Harry had gone a single, hellish week before he'd managed to do a bad mending job with sellotape, and he'd refused to let them out of his sight since.

Now, Lord Voldemort was taking them away from him. Lord Voldemort, who had caused Harry's loss of eyesight once already these past several weeks. Broom-calloused fingers curled into the bedsheets as the dim room became shapeless and indistinct, red eyes softening and bleeding into the Dark Lord's white face, the familiar weight of his frames vanishing from behind his ears. Harry opened his mouth to protest - and then Voldemort, unexpectedly, extended a psychic hand.

The wall between their minds blurred along with the room around him. Before Harry knew what was happening, he was swimming in the channel of their connection. He was, at once, lying pinned on the bed,

feeling more vulnerable than if he were physically naked - and also looking down at a boy who might as well have been a stranger. His eyes were huge and unfamiliar - Harry had never before seen them clearly in a mirror, not without his glasses hiding them. A myriad of emotions battled for control of his face, some of which Harry didn't even know were there in the first place, not until he saw them just now, written as plainly upon his expression as captions in a newspaper.

And yet - the discomfort drained from his body, green eyes relaxing with surprise and realization. Voldemort could see, even if Harry couldn't. Voldemort knew every thought flickering across his face, even if Harry didn't quite understand them. Voldemort *knew him*. And Harry knew Voldemort in turn. Harry had seen the Dark Lord this way, trembling and weakened nearly to the point of death, a small, weightless, ugly creature in Harry's arms. Harry had seen the Dark Lord's mind at its most vulnerable, had held the weeping child that haunted his thoughts. Voldemort had trusted him with information infinitely more precious than the privilege of eyesight. Voldemort, who was Harry but wasn't, who couldn't love but could perhaps start if Harry showed him the way.

He wasn't sure who initiated the kiss. He was mixed up between two minds, touching and being touched, quivering eyelids and long, slender fingers and warm lips. Harry surrendered himself to the Dark Lord, arching into his mind and his body. His memories and his thoughts, everything the Dark Lord had ever been after during his brutal attempts to force his way into Harry's mind - Harry offered it all to him, laying his soul as bare as his eyes.

The child had not cried in all this time... he looked up into the intruder's face with a kind of bright interest... Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle... the boy who had chased Harry in the Chamber of Secrets - disheveled and bent over a desk and ... The crimson eyes were glazed and as wide and wondering as a child's, the lipless gash of a mouth - smudged blue-purple-red with bruises and blood - forming a hapless 'O' of shock... He saw the blood trickling from its mouth, smeared across its cheeks when it had been thrashing along the ground. His disgust gave way to pity; this was not something for him to fear. In fact, he had never seen a more pathetic creature in his life... In nearly seven decades of life, he had never been held like this. Never known such a thing could be desirable...

Harry did not pull his hand away from the child's face, entranced by the way it nuzzled into his shirt, this creature that was somehow Lord

Voldemort... *"Happiness isn't all that hard to come by when you're not busy making everyone else miserable..."* He gave the tiny face a tender caress with two of his fingers, peering into the red eyes. *"I'm happy right now - aren't you as well?"* How astonishing it was that he had once sought to close these green eyes forever...

It was as nothing he had ever felt. Many times he had split minds open like glittering geodes, but this time it was *Harry* who opened to him - *Voldemort without having grown up in that awful room, Voldemort without a Basilisk strangling any impulses of good nature his entire childhood. Harry's arms were slung around his shoulders, and as Harry watched, Riddle turned his head and whispered something in his ear. They both laughed... Tom was kissing him* - and it was difficult to remain corporeal. White fingers trembled as they stroked, becoming almost wispy in their caresses, like ghost-pale smoke. He wanted to sink within this beautiful soul-flesh, coil himself up in such warmth and never emerge as their tongues and souls entwined and he shed Lord Voldemort to become something nameless and worshipful.

Memory and reality coalesced, and Harry no longer knew where he ended and Voldemort began. The weight of every feeling, every thought he had ever held for the Dark Lord pulsed through Harry's heart, so much emotion that he hardly thought it could all be contained within one body. But he was not alone. Voldemort was there, at the center of it all - Voldemort who was Tom Riddle who was Harry grappling with the intensity of a thousand different sensations, with denial and happiness and rage and burning, impossible love - it was almost too much. Harry clung with desperation to thin, naked shoulders. It occurred to him distantly that he was crying.

And then Harry's hands fell *through* Voldemort's skin - as light and cold as a gust of winter breeze - and he was swallowed by overwhelming panic. This wasn't a dream - it couldn't be - but then why was Voldemort leaving him? *"Tom!"* Harry gasped out, even as he saw his own green eyes growing wide through Voldemort's gaze, face twisting with fear.

"See what I have become?" the face said, "mere shadow and vapour..." It was something which, once experienced, could never be forgotten. To simply exist without flesh or voice - left with only that most ancient form of Legilimency: possession. Now it was a discipline simply to avoid being swept out of existence into others' thoughts. Skin was an instinct, not a rule. The body which had stepped from the stone

cauldron was ritual-flesh - ageless and malleable - fed by venom and Dark magic.

"*I am here*," the voice whispered softly with the boy's mouth as it had in the Ministry of Magic, its psychic weight coiled deep within Harry's chest. It was everywhere and nowhere as it hissed the delirious pleasure of connection up Harry's vocal folds, as crying emerald eyes burned vivid crimson.

It was unsettling, to say the least, to feel one's mouth form words all on its own. Another sort of panic came over Harry, the same that had held him bound and helpless in the Ministry last summer. But Voldemort's presence was not oppressive or painful inside of him - just a little uncomfortable. Harry took a deep, shuddering breath, wrapping his arms around himself for lack of anything else to hold.

For Voldemort *surrounded* him, filled Harry up until his pores were bursting with the Dark Lord's spirit. Harry was overflowing with pleasure more accustomed to skin and lips than the insides of his lungs, his blood cells, the marrow of his bones. Kisses and caresses were incomparable to the raw sensation wracking his body. It was overwhelming.

"Don't... oh, oh god, please - *stop*." Harry was a gasping, shivering mess of trembling skin and muscles. He hardly felt his burning, tear-stained cheeks. There was nothing for him to do but clutch helplessly at his own body. Possession certainly hadn't felt like this last year, or Harry would have been a lot less inclined to fight back. His spirit spun and swirled around Voldemort's; their souls weaved and flowed together, an intricate, ecstatic dance of mind and spirit.

He gasped and clawed at the blankets with Harry's blunt fingers, heaving breaths through the boy's lungs as though he were still trapped in the weak, infantine form of their memories. There was not enough room for the sensations which swept them both away, as he instinctively clung to the mind which spun with overwhelming emotion. And instead of torturing that consciousness - as he had clawed into Harry and so many others, with vicious psychic abandon - he caressed with every iota of pleasure he had ever experienced; kisses of pure, manic lust unfettered by the limitations of physicality.

There had always been those willing to let him into their hearts and minds, but never like this. Never such surrender to union. Never such agonising and all-consuming connection flooding every corner of his

awareness. It was seraphic: he was shooting through Harry's ecstasies with all the headlong, delirious speed of thought. Coiling possessor and arching possessed wound tighter and tighter until they were a single rush of magic that gave way to something starlit and quivering - then still.

Still.

And whole.

Part X

At the base of the statue lay a black-robed figure with dark hair.

"Tom!" Harry flew to his side. He fell to his knees on the stone floor, rolling Riddle onto his back. His eyes were closed, his skin clammy and pale. "Oh - oh god, Tom, please wake up -"

Grey eyes blinked open quite suddenly, startling him. His alarm was followed abruptly with relief - *he was okay...* "Tom," Harry breathed, brushing damp curls off his forehead. "C'mon, we've got to get out of here right away - there's a Basilisk - here, I'll help you up -"

But Tom did not make a move to stand. Instead, he continued to stare at Harry, his gaze so intense it bordered on unnerving. "Harry Potter," the young man said softly.

"Yes," Harry said urgently, "that's me - listen, we're in the Chamber of Secrets, we've got to go - if the Basilisk comes -"

Fingers against his lips silenced him. Harry blinked down into burning grey eyes, confused, as another hand came up and sifted through his hair. "Harry Potter," Riddle said again, and Harry couldn't read the expression in his gaze as the hand gently guided Harry closer, until his lips were a hair's breadth away from Harry's own. "I've waited a long time for this."

And then a knife slid between Harry's ribs, tearing through tissue and skin like butter, and Harry's scream was lost inside Tom Riddle's kiss, hard and hungry against his mouth.

Lord Voldemort's power to manipulate others stretches beyond your imagination, Dumbledore's voice whispered in Harry's ear. The blade twisted in his gut, blood blooming warm and sticky across his shirt. Stone groaned loudly from above, and then the chamber went dark and cold as the Basilisk emerged, its huge, long body slithering heavily along the floor, hissing its approval. "We couldn't control you," Tom whispered against Harry's mouth, the knife sliding deeper still, "so it was necessary to kill you, after all."

And the Basilisk wrapped around his body, and the chamber rang with Riddle's high, cold laughter, and icy scales pressed against his throat and mouth, suffocating him, strangling him -

Harry awoke with a shout, thrashing violently. Terror ripped through him - because, oh, god, the Basilisk was still *there*, it was coiled around him, it was going to rip him, kill him. With a cry, Harry threw the serpent from the bed with all of his might, hardly able to think through the weight of his fear.

Voldemort stirred. Fear was snapping through Harry's mind, suddenly struggling against the coils woven tight around his thoughts. Like an arachnid whose web is disturbed, the Dark Lord raced across synapses in search of the terror which made Harry thrash beneath him -

Nagini was on the floor, spitting murder, her body a raised column of open-mouthed fury. "Stop!" he commanded, trying to reign in Harry's panic. But the boy *snapped* and threw off his authority, ripping Voldemort from his spirit. It *burned*.

The Dark Lord shrieked as he was thrown back into form. There was no time to shift gracefully back into skin. Instead, it was an excruciating shaping of bone and sinew as his ritual-flesh reformed itself around what was left of his soul. He screamed: it was a return to the boiling torture of the cauldron as blood swirled over the sheets, forming rivers of veins, and white flesh slowly began to slide over red like a ruthlessly tight glove.

The sound of Voldemort's agony sliced through Harry's terror as effectively as the knife in his nightmare. The room slowly came back to Harry's senses - dim, blurry walls, furious snake, large bed - and his panic returned full throttle. Except now it was for the mass of blood and raw skin across the blankets, bubbling white flesh that made Harry feel nauseous with pain just to look at. He stared, horrified and helpless, as the Dark Lord writhed and morphed, magic hissing in the air.

"Voldemort!" His voice was a hoarse cry. Harry clutched at the Dark Lord's arms much like he had clutched the unconscious Tom Riddle in his dream, as though he could hold him together with his fingers, anchor him in reality. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

It was as beautiful as he remembered: that first breath drawn through new lungs. The itchy friction of the blankets, the sweat which layered the hands clutching at his wraith-like limbs, the smell of must; scent, touch, vibration - he was embodied once more. Naked as he had been on the night of his rebirth. Flesh, blood, and bone. He reached skeletal

fingers for Harry, hissing "*Hush, hush, hush...*" to his two precious ones.

"It was a dream, my treasure. Nothing more," Voldemort whispered in silken Parseltongue. *"You are safe. There is nothing to fear. My own, my soul..."* Nagini slid back onto the bed, quietened by Voldemort, echoing his words as she wrapped around them protectively. *"Hush, hush... Mine, mine..."*

"But - your body..." The Dark Lord was as smooth and flawless as a pearl beneath Harry's hands. Green eyes widened in horrified fascination as they took in the complete transformation, the Dark Lord's fingers stroked Harry's face and hair. "This isn't about that stupid nightmare! You were just - I was so afraid you were - blimey, I was just looking at your *insides*! Are you all right? I was so afraid..." Harry trailed off weakly, refusing to release his hold on Voldemort, perhaps lest the Dark Lord begin melting on the bed again.

The lipless mouth stretched into a small smile. *I was so afraid.* The fierce feelings emanating from their connection pleased Lord Voldemort immensely. *Such concern...* faith would soon follow. Voldemort leaned into Harry's touch, brushing his smooth, flat face across the boy's palms. "The shock of your nightmare forced me out of your mind without the time for me to - for want of a better word - collect myself. It can be an abrupt and painful transition when made involuntarily. Do not fear, Harry. I am immortal, and the pain does not linger." The smile widened, and Voldemort's livid eyes gleamed with strange excitement. "In fact, I rather welcome it. Such agonies are nothing compared to the triumph of resurrection."

Harry stared at Voldemort, feeling quite helpless. "Erm... If you say so." He wondered if he would ever understand the Dark Lord. Just when he thought he was beginning to get close, Voldemort would go and throw something like this at him.

"I'm sorry," Harry went on quietly. "I never meant to hurt you. I get - bad dreams sometimes, and they can be..." Night after night of awakening in the Gryffindor dormitory, clawing at his burning scar until it bled, the strange, guarded looks that would pass from Seamus to Neville to Dean.

Debilitating. The boy looked away, suddenly unwilling to pursue this train of thought.

"Harry, Harry... why apologise when it is Lord Voldemort of whom you dream?" Pale fingers found the boy's chin and lifted his gaze to

meet the slit-pupilled, scarlet eyes which graced the nightmares of so many. "I terrify you still. It is no easy thing, this... *connection* between you and I."

"I'm not afraid of you," Harry said, frowning. "I mean, I used to be, but my dreams are... different now. I'm afraid of -" (*the Basilisk opening its jaws, Voldemort's lifeless body floating in a sea of blood, Tom Riddle's eyes bereft of warmth and kindness*) "- something happening to you. Something that would take you away from me. And I know you could hurt me very badly if you wanted to. Probably more than you could before. But you said that you wouldn't hurt me, and I... I trust you. And I'm not afraid of you." It felt safe, somehow, saying such things while curled up in bed with the Dark Lord. Harry didn't need any of his Gryffindor courage to speak; he was merely stating facts.

Part of Voldemort exulted in the burgeoning trust Harry had in him. But another part regarded lack of terror in those bespectacled emerald eyes with cold anger. The Dark Lord's sharp, pale features were very like Tom Riddle in that moment: filled with sullen, wary suspicion. Fear was a most effective instrument of control - it did not please him to see Harry free of it. He resented the boy's casual tone. It troubled him... and things which troubled Lord Voldemort needed to be rearranged.

"Why?" his high voice was filled with the irritation of ignorance.

Harry knew well the look on Lord Voldemort's face: it was the very same Dudley wore on the rare occasion Aunt Petunia didn't give him his way. He also knew that this expression was usually followed by a temper tantrum involving heavy things being thrown in Harry's direction.

"Well - that's not to say you're not *scary*," Harry said quickly, quashing his smile before it could make it to his lips. "You scare me all the time. I'm just - afraid of different things now, y'know? Because I care about you. Hey - don't look so glum," he added, unable to keep the grin from his face now, "It's a good thing! We wouldn't have much fun together if I were frightened of you all the time. You can't have both."

"I see. We have... *fun*... together." Voldemort's mask-like face was eerily expressionless. "I was under the impression that we spend most of our time in a state of frustrated antagonism, punctuated by occasional moments of adrenalin-fuelled delirium." The Dark Lord paused, his smile mocking. "I must say, Harry, your notion of fun

leaves something to be desired. Ah, but doubtless you would say the same thing of me."

Harry snorted. "Well, that's because you don't *have* any fun. Reading books all day isn't fun for anyone, unless you're Hermione. And you're a lot more exciting than she is." He paused, a challenging smile beginning to grow across his face. "Here's an idea - how about you show me how *you* like to have fun, and then I can show you the real way. And if neither of us has a good time, you can just go back to, er, antagonising me, and I'll go back to being terrified out of my wits."

"I resent your implication that I have lost this wager before it has even begun." Voldemort stood, tall, moon-pale, and skeletal, taking his wand from beside the bed and robing himself with a swish of yew. Silk spun out of the air around him, rustling into layers of severe black. The Dark Lord's cat-like pupils glared down at the boy still sitting on the bed. "I assure you, Harry, that by the time we are through my sense of fun shall be unquestionable."

"Right." Harry snatched his own wand from the bedside table, leaping up to his full height - which was only a few inches above Voldemort's shoulder. The Gryffindor looked very much as he did just before a Quidditch match: shoulders squared, spine straight, brow furrowed with determination. Only the small, knowing smile curling his lips indicated otherwise. "And *I* say you'll be wondering how you ever went so long without having a truly good time! Only..." The boy paused, facade breaking as he gave the Dark Lord an apologetic grin. "Perhaps we could have some breakfast first?"

"Certainly," Voldemort replied after a moment's pause. In truth, he had grown so used to subsisting off small doses of venom and blood, that he had quite forgotten Harry was a boy to whom he was required to feed actual food. Wonderful. Now he would have *two* Horcruxes pestering him for food every hour of the day. *Wait for it... wait for it...*

"Master, Nagini is hungry... yes, yes... Nagini wants tasty human Master promised... yes, yes!"

The Dark Lord stifled a sigh and strode into the other room. Aside from a narrow, peeling door, its walls were entirely covered with shelves. There were two rickety chairs piled high with books on potion-making. Ingredients in jars and boxes cluttered the shelves and hung from the ceiling, several different cauldrons were neatly stacked in the corner, and a long, high bench on stood in the middle of the

room. The whole place had a feeling of highly organised mess. As though someone very meticulous had arranged everything to give the *effect* of comfortable disarray. If one looked carefully, it was noticeable that the books were stacked in alphabetical order and the ingredients were organised by properties. A bruise-coloured shrunken head with its sewn-up eyes and awful, distended lips was nailed above the door.

The Dark Lord immediately set to work summoning the ingredients he needed. A tray and a tiny cauldron floated out of a drawer and onto the bench. Voldemort gestured with his wand and the smooth metal of the cauldron began to heat until it was scalding. Another few charms and the tray curled into a bowl and the cauldron filled with steaming water. The bowl, slicked with oil, settled neatly atop the cauldron as eggs materialised and cracked tidily in, whisking themselves around in the bowl. Bottles of herbs jumped off shelves and an old-fashioned Muggle tin of powdered milk tipped itself open, mixing with water in the air until it became creamy and descended to swirl into the eggs.

Voldemort, meanwhile, was busily summoning a dead goat from his trunk, resizing and unfreezing it for the huge, eager snake coiling affectionately around his ankles as Harry's scrambled eggs shifted themselves neatly onto a plate. He spelled the front door open, letting in bright light, birdsong, breeze, and the sound of waves crashing on the sand. The Dark Lord shut his eyes and levitated the goat outside, shutting the door again behind Nagini with a graceful flick of the yew wand as he poured himself a goblet of thick silvery-white liquid.

While Voldemort was busy with cooking charmwork that could put both Mrs. Weasley and Aunt Petunia's combined efforts to shame, Harry took the opportunity to look around.

It was mind-boggling, the sheer amount of *things* Voldemort had packed into a single room - and useful, academic things, too, so far as Harry could tell. It was no wonder a young, knowledge-thirsty Severus Snape had been attracted to Voldemort's cause; all the Dark Lord probably had to do was show him his potions storeroom. For Voldemort seemed to have his own private apothecary: roots and newts and eggs and beetles of every colour, shape and size. There was even a jar filled with what looked suspiciously like whole human fingernails. Harry shuddered as he wondered how Voldemort had procured those.

And then there were books, so many that Harry couldn't help but

wonder if the Dark Lord had actually taken the time to read all of them. There were dictionaries and essays, cookbooks and encyclopaedias, notebooks in Voldemort's handwriting with strange names and hand-drawn symbols on the covers. There were books that looked positively ancient, and books in languages Harry had never seen, books that had been translated by Voldemort himself, and books with no authors at all. Harry couldn't imagine ever finding the time to read so many books - even the ones with the interesting titles. Had Voldemort really read all of these for *fun*?

Harry smirked. Overall, there was nothing here that suggested Voldemort knew anything about having a good time. This would be a piece of cake.

A plate heaped with eggs nudged at Harry's side, and the boy's stomach gave a grumble, reminding him of just how long it had been since his last meal. But he hesitated when he caught sight of the fork that came with it.

"Erm..." Harry stared at the silver utensil with equal parts disgust and fascination. A miniature skeleton was wrapped around the handle, arms twisting up the neck to the prongs. Its body had been forced into an unnatural position, and its jaw was agape in silent laughter ... or a scream.

Harry looked from the levitating plate of breakfast to Voldemort to the plate again, trying to figure out if the Dark Lord was serious. "You seem to have misplaced your... ritual heart-carving skeleton... thing."

"What?" Voldemort asked distractedly, finishing off his potion and licking the silvery residue from the edges of his colourless mouth. The taste of venom and unicorn blood was always invigorating. The Dark Lord pulled open a drawer, taking out a long, curved, obsidian carving knife which glittered strangely. It was engraved with images of skeletal Aztec figures liberating the hearts of sacrificial victims in order to reunite them with *Tonatiuh* - the heart-soul of the sun - as their transformed hearts flew sunward on trails of blood. "I have *not* -"

His livid eyes widened as he caught sight the fork held in Harry's reluctant fingers. Voldemort's taut leer was as sharp and wicked as the blade in his hand. "Ah - *that* utensil has no ritual significance. It has no purpose beyond the aesthetic, I assure you." Amusement hid in the corners of the Dark Lord's thin smile. "You do not find it... *fun*?"

"Um..." Harry couldn't find a way to hold it that didn't make him feel uncomfortable, like he was somehow violating the corpse the silver was depicting. He eventually settled for grasping it daintily about the knees, touching only with his thumb and middle finger. "I s'pose if you like the idea of a dead bloke bumping against your chin every time you want some eggs." He wrinkled his nose, examining it with open-mouthed horror. "Is that - a *tail*? How is this even remotely fun?"

Voldemort placed the Aztec knife carefully back in its proper draw and levitated a pile of books off a chair for Harry to sit on. "Well, perhaps fun is an exaggeration, but the look on your face certainly provides amusement enough." He covered his mouth with a pale hand, muffling chilly laughter.

It took Harry a few long seconds of gaping before he realised that Voldemort was actually *laughing at him*.

"You!" Harry made a half-hearted attempt at a scowl, but the urge to grin stupidly was simply too overwhelming. "You're having me on!" Perhaps Harry had underestimated him. A disbelieving laugh escaped the boy's lips before he could school his face into an expression he hoped was disapproving. But a smile still itched at the corners of his lips as Harry gratefully accepted the seat the Dark Lord had cleared for him, setting the plate of eggs on his lap.

"The premise was good, but the execution could use some work." Harry tapped his fingers thoughtfully against his chin. "It would have been much more effective if you'd used the actual ritual knife. Not to mention, y'know, detailing the very grisly history of all the organs you've dissected with it. But I'm sure you'll get the hang of it if you keep practicing."

"Yes, but that would involve the expectation that you will be able eat eggs with a carving knife, which is ridiculous." Voldemort rolled his eyes. "Not to mention that ingesting anything cut with a cursed obsidian blade is decidedly unwise." The Dark Lord shook his head and transfigured the knife and fork back into plain silver utensils. "Still, your confidence in my raw talent is gratifying. Doubtless these details are comparatively unimportant."

Now that he was equipped with a more appropriate utensil, Harry did not hesitate to dig into the scrambled eggs Voldemort had prepared for him. The warmth of the Dark Lord's smile still glowed in his skin. Harry resolved to do everything he could to make Voldemort laugh

like that again.

"Details are always important for the smoothest possible execution." Harry swallowed and grinned. "But you certainly show some promise. With the proper instruction, you might even turn out to be one of the best!" He paused, his smile curling into something sly and secret. "You'll have to do better than that if you think you're going to beat me today, though."

"Indeed?" Voldemort conjured another chair and summoned several journals. He took copious notes the last time he was on this atoll and it would be wise to consult them if he intended to win this bet. He leafed through the Naacal grammar he'd compiled. Harry might scorn reading books, but proper preparation was necessary for every endeavour. It was possible he might be taking the boy into considerable danger, after all. That was what Gryffindors found fun, was it not? He refocused on the archaic scripts on the paper before him, trying to refreshing his rusted vocabulary.

As Harry finished off the remainder of his eggs - which were unexpectedly tasty - his gaze was drawn repeatedly back to Voldemort, who was poring over a few of the notebooks Harry had noticed in his earlier explorations. The boy couldn't help his smile. Voldemort was taking this all very seriously. Well, if there was anything this Gryffindor was good at, it was a competition... and he did not intend to lose this one.

"I'll understand if you've changed your mind, y'know." Harry leaned forward on his knees, peeking over the top of one of the Dark Lord's journals. Voldemort's elegant handwriting was immediately recognisable, surrounded by strange symbols and translations in the Dark Lord's hand. "Er, especially if you're planning on giving me a language lesson. I'd rather just skip to the part where I've won, in that case."

The Dark Lord did not look up, his long white fingers sliding carefully across the parchment. "There may be a language component to my plan, but it is merely an incidental part of the - ah - fun, I assure you."

"Don't sound so reassuring. I might actually start to get excited." Harry threw a grin at Voldemort - still absorbed in his notes, hardly paying his Horcrux any mind - and set his empty plate on the table in the middle of the room. A long stretch shook off the remnants of sleep from his muscles. Despite their rather rude awakening, Harry felt well-

rested and content. He had slept remarkably well for having done so with a Dark Lord embracing his mind. In fact, falling asleep with Voldemort curled up around his soul had been... peaceful. Easy. Comfortable in ways that made Harry uncomfortable to think very much about.

"Right," said Harry, deciding it was far too early in the morning to blush. "I think there's a rule somewhere that fun should never require this much reading. Just a hint, since you're so new at this."

Voldemort closed his notes and set them aside. "Very well. Did you pack garments for swimming or shall I transfigure something for you?"

"Swimming?" Harry's eyebrows shot up into his black fringe in delighted surprise. Now that was more like it. "Well, we don't swim very often at school - but I might have -" Without waiting for a reply, the boy dashed into the other room. He burst back through the door again not a minute later, bright-eyed and grinning in a pair of Gryffindor red swimming shorts, wand tucked neatly into the waistband. They were a bit small around the waist; Harry had not had occasion to swim since the Triwizard Tournament "Where are yours?"

Voldemort stood and tapped his sleeve with his yew wand. The black robes began to shift and meld around his tall frame, rolling like molten tar over his feet and hands, lengthening even further into the abnormally spindly, webbed fingers and toes of a Grindylow. From his pale neck down, the Dark Lord was now a sleek, black water demon.

The over-long hands drew on a cloak and lowered the hood. A misty shadow drew across his features like a veil, obscuring everything but the faint, red gleam of his eyes. Perhaps this was Voldemort's solution to the problem he had had with the sunlight. "Come." He opened the door and offered Harry his strangely elongated fingers.

Between the bestial, webbed fingers and the shroud that looked more fit for a funeral than a frolic on the beach, Harry was beginning to doubt his initial excitement. Nevertheless, he accepted Voldemort's proffered hand with a smile. He, Harry, had been the one to make the terms of their agreement, after all. It was only fair that Voldemort had his chance before Harry utterly trounced him.

They made quite a pair - Voldemort dark and sinister against sand as white as the snow they'd left behind in Britain, Harry bounding alongside him wearing nothing but a pair of bold red shorts. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue, the air fresh and salty. Harry shone in

the morning sunlight, glowing with the prospect of an entire day laid out before them - and with only the purpose of having a good time together! No classes, no Snape, and no war. It was hard to remember all the reasons he had thought this a bad idea.

With the promise of a swim, Harry had expected Voldemort to lead him toward the shoreline. So when the Dark Lord headed further into the forest instead, Harry hesitated, frowning. "Er - the water's that way!" he called out, hurrying to keep up with Voldemort's long strides.

Voldemort glided through the tropical forest like a spectre, brightly-coloured birds taking flight from the trees around him. He seemed to unsettle even the tiny lizards and insects, which darted away from underfoot. "This island is a coral atoll, Harry. It was formed by a reef growing up around the edges of a volcano. Then, when the tectonic pressure which raised the volcano ceased, it slowly sank back into the ocean, leaving behind the ring of coral which encircled it. Our destination is the vast lagoon just beyond this forest, where an ancient sorcerous civilisation once dwelled on the slopes of this isle."

Harry felt even clumsier than usual, clambering loudly through branches and bushes while Voldemort navigated the forest floor with easy elegance. It wasn't fair. Voldemort seemed to be better than him at *everything*, even something so simple as taking a stroll through the woods. The gentle pounding of the tide against the shore fell into the distance as the trees thickened around them, the ocean's lull gradually replaced by the humming of summer insects and the chatter of the birds overhead.

"An ancient civilisation." There was a touch of incredulity to Harry's voice. Leave it to Voldemort to go all out. "Maybe I've underestimated you. That does sound... a little more interesting than reading all day." In fact, it sounded *brilliant*. Not that Harry would be admitting this to Voldemort anytime soon - at least not until he'd been beaten fair and square. Harry tried his hardest to mask his excitement.

"I nearly drowned in the lake once," he added conversationally. "You know, that time you entered me in that notoriously lethal tournament when I was only fourteen." The space behind his ears twinged painfully at the memory of gills shrinking on his neck, lungs spasming with lack of oxygen. Harry wrinkled his nose. "I hope we won't be using Gillyweed. That wasn't, um, very much fun."

As Harry talked, they stepped through the trees to the sandy edge of the wide, flat waters of the lagoon. His mouth dropped open,

bitterness forgotten. The sight was an arresting one: a huge body of clear, still water, shining brilliant blue in the sunlight, that stretched far into the distance. Harry splashed in up to his shins, delighted by the ripples his movements made in its glassy surface. He wriggled his toes in the sand. Was there really an ancient civilisation buried in the depths of these peaceful waters? "What would you prefer, my treasure?" Voldemort asked, a tall shadow on the shore. "I could cast a Bubble-Head Charm or transfigure you into a Merman...?"

"This is - wow, this is really beautiful!" Harry grinned over his shoulder with breathless awe at the Dark Lord before he realised Voldemort had asked him a question. "Oh, um - I think I'll go with the Bubble-Head Charm." Somehow, he didn't think a metamorphosis from human to Merman would be any more pleasant than sprouting gills.

Voldemort discarded his cloak on the sand and waded out into the water. The veil of darkness lifted and Voldemort's moon-pale face was visible above his dark, amphibian body, shining in the sunlight, his smooth eyelids firmly shut. The Dark Lord's Grindylow feet instinctively left the sand and began to swim as his sleek, black body swirled with sinuous ease through the shallows.

Come here, Voldemort called to his mind, weaving their latent connection tighter as he held out a spindly, webbed hand for Harry to take, reaching out blindly. A frisson of fear and excitement shivered down Harry's spine. He obediently slipped his hand between the Dark Lord's strange, black fingers. *We will rely upon our mental link in order to communicate underwater. I shall also require that you obey any command I may have cause to give. We are a far from the Hogwarts lake and ruins are not the only legacy from antiquity this place holds, understood?*

"All right," he began to say, before remembering they were supposed to be communicating through thought. *All right*. Harry smiled apologetically. Not that Voldemort could see, eyes squeezed shut as they were. The smile grew into something soft and admiring. Voldemort had left Britain for him, was standing sightless and gruesomely transfigured in blinding sunlight - all to make him, Harry, happy. Overcome by an unexpected surge of affection, the boy reached up and captured Voldemort's mouth in a kiss.

I'll be very careful. Promise. He pressed his smile against the Dark Lord's thin lips. *And I'll even listen to everything you say. But we'd better not be too careful - if you want any chance at beating me, anyway.*

Voldemort leaned into the kiss, and Harry could taste something sweet and metallic on his tongue. He revelled for a few minutes more in the warm, wet intimacies offered by Voldemort's mouth, before the Dark Lord broke the kiss to carefully place the tip of his wand on Harry's nose. A hissed incantation, and then a bubble floated free of the yew wand, attaching itself ponderously to Harry's face, protecting his lungs and glasses. The world grew distorted and strange as the bubble surrounded his head, sealing around his neck. Harry raised a tentative hand to touch it, suddenly anxious. What if it popped while he was underwater? Did he only have a certain amount of time before he'd run out of oxygen? He looked up to ask - just in time to see the Dark Lord vanishing underwater, a dark shape streaking, shark-like, beneath the surface and into the lagoon, his darkly scaled body racing with inhuman grace - *down, down* - scattering schools of jewel-coloured fish.

Well, that wouldn't do. Shaking off his apprehensions, Harry pulled his wand from his swim trunks and dove in after him - although he couldn't quite resist taking an instinctive deep breath before dipping his head underwater.

The lagoon, so deceptively peaceful and still from the shore, was a jungle of colours and sea life beneath the surface. The bubble charm no longer distorted his vision but made his eyesight crystal clear; Harry could see every stripe on every fish, the swaying polyps of coral reefs, a flutter of spotted jellyfish - and (*another thrill of excitement, giving him goosebumps in the warm water*) the deep, dark depths below, which whispered promises of all sorts of adventures and interesting sights to behold.

But Harry was beginning to regret his hasty dismissal of Gillyweed and Mermen. His hands and feet were not webbed as they'd been during the Triwizard Tournament, so his movements underwater were sluggish and awkward. Not like Voldemort, whose new skin went from disturbing and silly above the surface to beautiful and sleek here in the lagoon, spinning and flipping as gracefully as a native Grindylow. *Hey!* A laugh escaped Harry's mouth, a flurry of bubbles exploding from the larger one encasing his face. *That's not fair - I can't swim nearly as fast as you!*

When did the world become fair? Voldemort's long, blackly-webbed fingers latched playfully around the boy's ankles and pulled him downward much like a real water demon would seize its prey. Sharp teeth nipped playfully at Harry's calves as Voldemort's livid eyes glimmered almost purple in the water.

As they sank, the Dark Lord shifted his grip. His right arm was wrapped tightly around Harry's waist as he extended his wand hand to light the way, using his powerful webbed feet to propel them further toward the bottom. Tiny fish brushed against them, feeding on luminous coral and vibrant green algae. Voldemort did not allow himself to become too distracted, however, alert for larger predators and the eerie guardians of the lagoon's secrets.

And there - far below as the pink and orange coral beneath them gave way to clear, blue water - were the ruins. Sprawling monolithic stones; labyrinthine streets and stately steps sunken into the sand. Magic beckoned with a pulsing call to shattered, many-pillared temples of the once-proud acropolis grown dark-slimed and inchoate with the passing of millennia.

"Wow." The word was carried on a rush of air as all the breath fled from Harry's lungs. His wild excitement, which had held him captivated as Voldemort spiralled them downward through the water, drained away; there was only awe, staggering in the face of the vast, crumbling city stretched out across the lagoon's floor.

What is this? Harry asked as soon as he remembered how he was supposed to be communicating. *Who lived here? What happened to them?* The ruins were void of the bustling sea life that painted the salt water in bright colours above their heads. The deep, aching pull of ancient magic radiated from the city below in powerful waves.

For the first time, Harry found himself wondering if this was a good idea.

He trusted Voldemort's judgment, of course - not to mention the Dark Lord's ability to defend them should they fall into danger - but Harry had been thrust into enough bad situations in the past to know when things weren't quite as they should be.

It is the remnants of the beginnings of magic. Magic before wands or spells. But hush, its guardians approach. Do nothing, my treasure.

And, as he spoke, misted green and pearly-toothed shapes ghosted up from the depths. They were naked and wretched with livid, bulging eyes, and pouty, flabby lips. Corpses wreathed in weed, as ancient and unsettling as the terraced, stone apertures from which they came. Swollen and pale like the Inferi Voldemort had enchanted to guard Slytherin's locket.

These were twisted creatures born of magic so ancient as to be palaeogean. Yet their glassy eyes were aglow with a strange, phosphorescent radiance, flickering like undersea firelight. The dead formed into monstrous servitors by rituals lost to time. The Dark Lord had long searched for the key to their existence - a true necromantic harnessing of body and soul. Power glittered in their malformed claws as they stared at the Dark Lord and his Horcrux.

Awful lips whispered with lyrical voices akin to the water-song of Mermish. Voldemort's Grindylow fingers tightened around Harry's waist as he swam forward to meet them.

His high, cold reply was spoken in a voice of absolute command. Naacal bubbled from the Dark Lord's lips, guttural and eerie. Its meaning sounded loud across the link he and Harry shared: *That is not dead which may eternal lie and with strange aeons even death may die.*

The creatures shrieked excitedly and bowed in ritual obeisance, ghosting back down into the ruins below like a school of malformed, grey-green fish, leaving Voldemort and his Horcrux alone in the deep silence of the lagoon.

Harry's eyes followed the bloated sea creatures until they were completely out of sight, but he didn't feel any better when they were gone. His mind was racing, trying to decipher the cryptic meaning behind Voldemort's words. *And with strange aeons even death may die.* Harry shuddered in Voldemort's arms; all this talk about death wasn't very much fun. When he'd suggested a day having a good time together, he hadn't anticipated they'd be spending the morning underwater with animated corpses.

Harry tore his gaze from the ruins, which were silent and still once more. He was overflowing with questions, excitement tentatively reawakening in the absence of those horrible creatures. *What were those things? What did they want? Will they attack us?*

As I said, it is their duty to guard this place until the day their masters reawaken. They shall not trouble us further. Voldemort's nostrils were flaring excitedly, air bubbling from the small, reptilian slits, as he pointed with his wand at the dead city sprawling beneath them. *It is said that the first Horcrux was created by Herpo of Athens, but my studies have shown that the practice originated in far earlier cultures. This was a civilisation based on magic's oldest form: sacrifice. I do not think your mother knew what power she invoked that fateful night. It is only in places*

such as this that it is possible to begin to understand such ancient laws. It was here that I found a carving depicting the ingredients necessary for my rebirth and it is here we must search if we wish to discover more about the bond we share.

An old wound rankled in Harry's chest, and he found himself suddenly and unexpectedly angry. Of course his mother hadn't known! She would have never sacrificed her life for Harry's if she'd had any idea that she was binding her son to a monster in the process! A vicious, resentful part of him wanted to shake himself completely from the Dark Lord's embrace; he was enraged that Voldemort could speak of her death with such flippancy. *I'm glad you find her murder so fascinating*, he spat over the connection before he could stop himself.

But then he forced himself to pause and count to ten before he said something he'd regret. Voldemort wasn't a monster. He wasn't. Lily Potter hadn't known that - but if she had, Harry was sure she would have been proud of what her son was doing, of all the lives he was saving and the poor, loveless boy he was slowly nurturing back to life. *Right*. He took a deep breath of the fresh air provided by Voldemort's bubble charm and tried to make himself sound sincere. *Sorry. That sounds - very exciting.*

Harry... Anger and disgust washed across their link, shocking the Dark Lord. This was meant to be enjoyable. He had thought the boy would be pleased - as Voldemort had been many years ago - to come to such a place and study the oldest forms of magic from the carved, stone murals of this ancient place of power. Few wizards ever dreamed of visiting such arcane splendour - of delving into the secret essence of magic itself!

But Harry was not like him. Voldemort was reminded of how he would drive away the children in to orphanage without knowing why: the look on Amy's face when he dispassionately skewered a mouse with his fork. She had been shrieking *get it, get it, get it!* And he had killed it for her. Yet when the little rodent gave a final squeak and Tom looked up at her with a smile, it was not gratitude but horrified revulsion he received in return. He had despised her after that. A small-minded and ungrateful girl. *I did not... intend it that way... if this place does not please you...?*

No, it's - not that. Harry sighed in a long stream of bubbles and shifted in Voldemort's arms; floating in the water without the burden of gravity, the movement brought his nose inches from the Dark Lord's

face. *This is all very exciting. It's just... difficult, sometimes.* Harry's gaze hardened. *You killed them. You killed my parents. And you aren't even the least bit sorry for it. You'll never understand how hard that is for me.*

He did not know what to say. False apologies would only infuriate Harry further. Voldemort could not deny that he felt nothing for the boy's parents, the Mudblood's Muggle father, or - indeed - his own Muggle father dead at his hands. All of them dead and rotting in the ground. The Dark Lord could not count all of the wide-eyed gazes he had frozen with blinding, green light. Guilt was for the weak. A useless emotion which preyed upon those whose will was not strong enough to stand proudly by their deeds.

The world was fashioned in blood and strife. Predator and prey. A great carnival of death. He was far wiser than all of those who pretended to fairness or morality - all of them hiding from the truth. Was it not a blessing to be born free of such feeble illusions?

Voldemort resented Harry's glare, as he had resented the orphanage staff, Professor Dumbledore, and little Amy Benson. He led Amy into a cave by the sea and showed her something to merit her horror. So many voices: *you do not understand... woefully ignorant... you will remain down here and think about what you've done... you monster... not like the other children... you'll never understand...*

Stop it. Harry's words cut through the voices, a mental knife. He held the pale face in both of his hands, pressed his forehead against Voldemort's so that the only thing separating them was the thin, magical bubble. Green eyes bore into crimson. *You're not a monster. You've shown me that. You're not. I need you to believe that for me.* He took a deep, unsteady breath. *It just... hurts sometimes... that I'll never get to know them, that I'll - never learn their favourite songs, or ask them how they fell in love, or talk to them about - anything, anything at all...* His eyes squeezed shut, and when he opened them again, there was a plea shining in their depths. *Don't you know what it's like to lose something? Wouldn't you feel - pain, or sadness, if you lost Nagini? If you lost - me?*

It was a long moment before Voldemort spoke: *When I was younger, I felt as you do. Like you, I had no photographs. I imagined them, wondered what sort of people they were. When Professor Dumbledore told me I was a wizard, I was so convinced my magical blood must come from the Riddles because, if my mother had been a witch she would never have died from such a common thing as childbirth. She would have used her power to stay*

with me. I hated them for leaving me, and when I discovered my father's betrayal and my mother's magic I only hated them more.

I have lost many things. I have lost words, voices, thoughts... My diary and my grandfather's ring... lost. My soul, my powers, my body... lost. Yet I did not feel sadness. Only agony and hatred. But even pain has finally lost its hold over me. It is proof of life - of continued existence. Everything burns away in the end. Only Lord Voldemort remains. Hated and hating. Immortal.

A shudder passed over him, chasing gooseflesh across Harry's skin. True darkness, huge and hungry and threatening to consume what little was left of Voldemort's mind, glowered at Harry through scarlet eyes. The Basilisk, slowly squeezing the life from a gasping Tom Riddle even as it shielded him from emotions too painful for Voldemort to accept.

I don't believe you. Harry's voice was vehement across their connection, his eyes blazing fiercely. *There's more to you than hate. I've seen it and I've touched it and I've held it in my arms. It's all right to be sad, Tom - it's alright to feel pain. To feel pain and sadness means that you can also feel happiness, and love. It means that you're - human.*

Dumbledore's words still rang fresh in Harry's mind. The pain of losing Sirius was a wound that had not quite yet begun to scar over. But the terrible grief he'd experienced upon Sirius' death was incomparable to the comfort he had found in his godfather while he'd still been alive. Sirius wouldn't have wanted Harry to wallow in his pain until it numbed him, to forget the happy memories they'd shared just so Harry wouldn't need to feel the ache of his loss. He would have wanted Harry to grow, to use both the good times Sirius had given him and the pain that came with them to make himself stronger.

There's nothing wrong with being human, Harry's voice whispered inside Voldemort's mind, reaching for the humanity he knew still existed there. *Immortality would be pretty miserable if you're spending your eternity entrenched in hatred.* He gripped Voldemort tighter, desperation twisting his face. *There's so much more to you than hate. And I won't give up until I know you see that, too.*

A shadow passed across Voldemort - perhaps a shark, far above, eclipsing the light for a moment. He felt naked, suddenly oppressed by the pale, struggling gills beneath his jaw, the weight of the water all around him and Harry's fierce grip on his senses. The boy's words

choked him, disgusted him. He was *not* human. It had been a relief to shed the skin, hair, and eyes that belonged to his Muggle father and become something greater. It had been a relief to gaze into the mirror, accept that he was not a man but some other creature entirely, and absolve himself of the burden of pretence. He had let his mask fall a long time ago and relished the terror in all those who looked upon Lord Voldemort.

His heart was thumping wildly; he was snared in Harry's emotions, which felt like a net tightening inside his chest. Voldemort was chained to the boy's desperate hopes and it *hurt*. The Dark Lord shrieked, thrashing against the soul that held his mind fast in its embrace. *You will never find that which you seek. You will only find your reflection.*

He was a parasite feeding off Harry's happiness. It was the only reason the boy was here and not safely locked away where no one would find him. He wanted Harry to be happy... happy with him. Not because he cared about the boy. Not because of some nebulous impulse toward humanity. Voldemort did not care about anyone but himself. But when this foolish child was happy a long-dead part of Voldemort felt it too and that made Harry precious beyond words.

You are all that is human about me, Harry. You are my kindness, my sadness, and my joy. Without you, I am everything you fear and despise. You are the only light you will ever see in my eyes.

The Dark Lord's sliver of soul, withered and thin, flailed within Harry's thoughts, resisting - and Harry refused to let go. He held Tom's spirit close to his heart, stroking it with memories of their laughter - with *aren't you happy now, as well?* and the Dark Lord's giggles interspersed with owl noises and long, breath-taking kisses that made everything else seem irrelevant. Spurred on by the Horcrux's advice, Harry would not back down; he would not let Voldemort convince him otherwise.

Don't you feel it? The words slipped out in a blend of Parseltongue and bubbles, even as he murmured them within Voldemort's struggling mind. He held the Dark Lord's face between his hands in the dark water, staring intently into red eyes. *When we're together, I feel... whole inside. Like there's this chunk of me missing, and when I get you to laugh, or smile... there isn't anything that could make me happier. I feel complete.* He smiled softly. *Don't you see? I couldn't feel this way without you feeling so as well. That's no reflection. It's always been here, in your*

soul - you just needed someone to show you where to look.

He broke, Harry's relentless onslaught of words and feelings shattering his defences. But Voldemort knew, he *knew* this burning, torturous hope had never existed before Harry. And he was afraid - so afraid - that it would vanish and he would be alone once more. That was why it was so necessary that Harry understand, that Harry accept the he had sole custody over Lord Voldemort's frail sanity and cease insisting otherwise, that Harry *promise* him...

The eighth part of my soul... Keep it safe for me, Harry. Promise me. It is such a fragile, frayed thing you have shown me. You asked me what I would feel if I lost you? You know, you know what I am... what would follow... The words might have been a threat but for the desperate plea that rushed to find sanctuary in the certainty of Harry's thoughts.

Eight pieces of soul. Harry felt a little weak in the knees; he might have needed to sit down if they weren't floating, weightless, at the bottom of the lagoon. No wonder Voldemort's mind seemed so shattered. How could one expect him to feel empathy and compassion when there was so little left of him to feel? Harry thought it wondrous Voldemort knew any emotion at all.

It's a part of me now. I'll care for it with my life. I promise. He pulled Voldemort tighter against him, and they spun a little in the water. *But you have to promise me that you'll take care of your own soul, too. That you'll let me help you. That you'll try - really try - so we can heal it. Together.*

Voldemort gazed through the sheen of protective bubble that clung to Harry's features. Such ignorance - such innocence. The boy, naked but for his small trunks, wrapped himself around the Dark Lord with that same daring, terrified gaze he had encountered on the night of his rebirth. As he stared, Voldemort felt his (*or were they Harry's?*) desperate emotions drain away to be replaced with a great weariness.

Many wizards made much of the fact that Harry Potter had his Mudblood mother's eyes. Voldemort had never really noticed. His memories of Mrs Potter were of a pale, pleading woman with a swathe of dark red hair swirling about her as she threw her arms wide to shield her son. Now - looking at her earnest, foolish child - he saw again her green eyes desperate with love for her offspring and how

similar they were, mother and son. How trusting, how stupid... how remarkably brave. *I'll care for it with my life.*

Was *this* Albus Dumbledore's vaunted love staring out at him? Voldemort's lipless mouth curved into a bitter smile, small bubbles issuing from his small, flat nostrils and clinging to the pearly angles of his cruelly emaciated features. It was, all of it, too much: Harry's absolute faith that the Dark Lord was something which could be fixed ... sewn back together like a tattered cloak ... never seeming to realise that such things were part of Voldemort's very substance. When Voldemort spoke of insanity, he meant the forest which had ground his once polished mind down to ungovernable rage ... not the clear, cold rightness which he had always known before.

He was Lord Voldemort, not a broken thing in need of Harry Potter's help. Except that was *exactly* what he was. It scared him into silence. All his life he had fought to be self-reliant; independent of his own kind ... and now he was bound to Harry, *required* Harry in a way that Harry would never require him. Something was crumbling inside him ... the wall of fierce pride that had kept so much at bay for so long. And, as it fell, so too fell the convictions that had buttressed it: *I am Lord Voldemort, I need nothing and no one, I contain everything I could ever desire...* revealing the naked flame of hateful *need* that he had long thought extinguished by lack of hope.

Harry loves you; Voldemort remembered the words, they welled up as though from a dream. But Potter did not ... *could not*. All Harry saw was something in need of help, someone to *save*. The boy had cracked open his skull and found all the miseries, doubts, and insecurities that lay behind the legend of the immortal Dark Lord. What was love but a fancy, a sickness that blinded wizard and Muggle alike to the realities of the world? The serpent in him rejected it utterly - this foreign emotion that had no place in his solitary world.

Harry did not know that what he asked for could never be, but instead of disillusioning him, Voldemort - perhaps for the first time in his life - wanted to preserve such innocence. Guard it against the black truth that would see it torn asunder. It was *his*.

So he smiled at Harry as though he were hysterical with joy, as though the *hopehopehope* burning in the boy's heart (how easy it was to drown himself in such emotion, to pretend it was his own) did not hurt him. And, *oh*, how could he tell Harry he would rather be a monster than feel *this*...? He held the boy tighter, livid eyes raw with determination. Nothing would take this from him.

I promise, he replied. And, for a moment, he almost believed his own lie.

Voldemort's gaze glowed scarlet, dying embers suddenly rekindled from a breath of fresh air. Eyes full of promise as Voldemort swore to him. And the sincerity - the genuine and honest purpose that Harry saw there kindled its own hope in Harry's heart. Such determination in those eyes was usually only accompanied by the Dark Lord's thirst for blood pounding agony in his scar... but today, it was not distorted by the madness that typically shrouded the burning crimson like black smoke.

Voldemort *wanted* this. Harry could see the strength of the Dark Lord's resolve in his eyes, his thoughts. Voldemort wanted this, and he would honestly, truly try, just for Harry. And if Voldemort really set his mind to it, Harry had no doubt he would accomplish whatever task was laid before him, even one as impossible as this.

Impossibility was only another challenge, after all - hadn't Voldemort said as much himself?

Thank you. Harry pressed tender bubble kisses to Tom's gaunt face, holding the strange, dark Grindylow body against his own and sending them swirling gently sideways. *I won't give up until you're better, I promise*, he whispered, and felt the magic of the ruins below clinging to his words, sparking against them. *I have so much faith in you. I won't let you down.*

Harry would show him how to love. He would show the Dark Lord compassion and happiness. And, in doing so, Voldemort would come to understand the horror of murder, would never want to kill another person again. Harry beamed with the possibility of such a fantasy's realisation, of a world without Basilisks and war and death. A world with Tom Riddle, happy and whole - the way he should have been from the very beginning.

Come, Voldemort's high voice whispered tenderly across Harry's spirit, resonating with leashed emotion. *I will show you the city.* The Dark Lord's long, black Grindylow feet propelled them downward still embraced. *This place is one of the few surviving examples of early sorcerous civilisations. Have you not wondered of what your teachers speak when they talk of magic old beyond remembrance - the ancient laws of blood and sacrifice which saved your life and granted Lord Voldemort another?* Down, down, down, they swam past crumbling towers

encrusted with coral as fish darted furtively through the eerie, empty light that seemed to emanate from the ghostly ruins.

Once or twice, Harry thought he caught the unnatural glitter corpse-eyes staring through the windows of the dead city. *I use these examples deliberately as they serve as excellent illustrations of the two beliefs that grew up around the use of such power. Some ancients believed that sacrifice should always be voluntary.* Black fingers caressed the headless statue of a kneeling man. *Others held that such power was more easily obtained by force.* Livid eyes turned to the serene, decapitated head lying some distance away. *You can imagine which side won.*

Harry gently pried himself from the Dark Lord's arms to swim over to the decapitated head. For a moment, he thought he could see his mother's eyes staring up out of its slackened face. *Says who? Voluntary sacrifice saved my life.* He turned from the eerie, empty gaze of the statue back to Voldemort, brow furrowed in thought. *Wouldn't that make it more powerful, if it can overcome sacrifice taken by force?*

You mistake me, Harry. What you surmise is quite correct. The oldest of magics... willing sacrifice... theirs became a civilisation which - which embraced death - endlessly casting itself into the beyond. Harry could feel the fearful aversion shivering in Voldemort's thoughts. Then green light and green eyes and he was ghosting, a mere breath from dissolution, through a forest he could not touch. Helpless with loneliness and rage. *I should have remembered...*

Many weeks ago, such words might have resonated with Harry in a very different way. The thought of embracing death, sacrificing his own life so that his friends might live... it had haunted him since he had first learned about the Horcrux living in his scar. A small part of Harry had been steeling himself for that inevitable moment ever since. But things had changed. His *future* had changed. Harry could see that now more clearly than ever, looking at this lovely, powerful, broken creature before him. There were still many sacrifices to come in Harry's life - he wasn't so naive as to believe otherwise - but they would serve a different purpose now.

You should have done a lot of things, Harry murmured across the connection. *I should have done a lot of things, too. But the world doesn't stop for our mistakes, Tom. The most important thing is that we're able to see them clearly now. That we don't repeat them. And that... we try to find the good that comes out of them.*

My name is Lord Voldemort! came the reflexive hiss, but then the Dark

Lord's anger softened and webbed fingers pulled Harry close and a flat nose nestled against his forehead, pressing the filmy bubble between them. *Our misfortunes have delivered me a gift beyond all imagining. Truly, I shall never cease to wonder... I had thought myself born devoid of those feelings which you now inspire.*

In that moment of shared intimacy and pure, overflowing joy, Harry found his thoughts bubbling excitedly over the link before he could stop them: *That's because you were - but - but then that means the Horcrux was right! It's really not hopeless after all - you really can -*

He clamped down suddenly on his thoughts when he saw the shock flicker across Lord Voldemort's snake-like face. *What? How can you possibly-?*

The Horcrux told me, Harry said quickly, and seized Voldemort's hands. *Yesterday, when I was - knocked out... well, he was there, and he told me that your mum, when she fell in love with your father... well, the way you were born... Harry swallowed. She'd given him a Love Potion. It's why you've never been able to - understand. But - but there's love in my blood, you see, because of my mum, and now it's in your blood, too, and that means that maybe... He squeezed the webbed fingers, so strung up with hope and desire that he felt like something might snap inside of him. Maybe you can finally feel it now.*

It had always been Lord Voldemort's understanding that Tom Riddle had left Merope Gaunt because she told him she was a witch. He was not ready to absolve his father of blame and it hurt him in places he had long ago thought numb: the unwanted child of an unwanted liaison. The reason he had smelt nothing when Professor Slughorn had shown them Amortentia... that missing piece of himself that Harry called love, but which Voldemort knew was far more significant than mere affection; that peculiar, mammalian understanding - *connection* - which he had only known with Potter, the boy who anchored him to the world.

He did not know whether the emotions he felt were Harry's or his own. His heart galloped with raw grief for, just as he had always known he was special, so too had he always known that he was alone, born without some vital component which others seemed to so easily intuit, but it seldom troubled him. Had he not been fortunate to escape such a burden? His breathing levelled and he squeezed the boy's hands in return. *I do not know,* he kept his thoughts away from Harry's bright eyes, *perhaps you will teach me?*

Vivid frustration burned unexpectedly across the connection. Harry's mouth opened as though to speak, but his words came out only in a stream of incomprehensible bubbles. *Take us back*, came Harry's thoughts, tinged with anger and urgency. *I need to speak to you.*

Very well, he supposed he had lost their wager rather thoroughly by now, and therefore saw no reason to continue to show Harry a place which seemed to offer the boy little but unpleasantness. He arced his wand through the water and they disappeared onto the sandy doorstep of the shack. Voldemort immediately let go of Harry's hand, dispelling the Bubble-Head Charm and his own transfiguration, retreating into the cool, dark relief of his old Knockturn Alley rooms. He turned back toward the boy at the noise of the door slamming shut behind him. Harry was soaking wet, his dark hair wild and dripping, his swim trunks clinging to his thighs. The boy's fists were clenched so tightly his skin was stretched white across his knuckles.

When Harry finally spoke, his hoarse voice seemed unnaturally loud, even though it was soft with barely leashed anger.

"I want you to look at me - in the eye - and tell me that you don't feel anything."

Voldemort did not know what to make of this sudden fury, but it thrummed in his blood as it did in Potter's. "I do not know - do you understand? Can you possibly understand what it is to be intimately confronted with what has been anathema your entire existence?" He stared into those emerald eyes, easily matching and surpassing Harry's fury. "I feel *everything* - you wash upon me like a tidal wave - and I cannot comprehend half of what such a flood evokes!"

"*That's not good enough!*" Potter shouted at him. "God *damnit*, Tom! Look at me, and *tell me how you feel!* Tell me honestly that you felt *nothing* every single time we'd been torn apart - tell me that you didn't lie awake for hours and hours the way I did once you'd woken up, trying to remember every *single* little detail so that you wouldn't forget even the tiniest thing that had happened between us! I can't tell you exactly when it happened - when I realised that I was going bloody crazy just thinking about your... your mouth, and your eyelids, and your damn *fingers* - about how your lips twitch at the edges when you find something amusing, and you don't want me to know... about how your hands *shake* when I'm kissing you... I'm not sure when it happened, but it did, it's over with, and I know that I can't be the only one who *feels* like this! I've seen the way you look at me! I've felt the things you're feeling when you're staring at me, when

you're *touching* me - and it's *not* because I'm your Horcrux, and it's *not* because my feelings are bloody - washing all over yours! Look at me, and *tell me you don't love me!*"

And despite his resolution to shield the boy from his convictions, despite his wish to harbour such beauty with deceit, Voldemort simply could not stand there and not say it. "I do *not*-" he tried, summoning all his disdain, "I-" But his lipless mouth was stuck shut. It would not say the words. He attempted it again, hissing in frustration, but it came out mangled by feeling. He raged against it, this dependence - this *terror* - until finally it burst from him "I DO NOT LOVE YOU!" but so demonstrably false, so cruelly lacking in anything but denial; the yell of a fearful, recalcitrant child who could not bear to admit that this creature, who had wormed his way so far into his heart, was right.

Potter seized his robes, eyes bright with furious tears. "So the only reason I'm here... the only reason you're doing *any* of this - is because I'm... because you're..." His voice broke, and his upper lip curled in a snarl. Harry yanked him forward so that their faces were only inches apart; Voldemort could not escape from that blazing green stare which seemed to pierce his very soul. "*Say it again.*"

"*I am...*" He could not. "I..." He could not. He hissed and spat poison, but no more would come. There was no relief from that fierce stare, that rush of raw power that burned his forked tongue into silence. Nowhere to hide his fear that Harry would abandon him, would tire of his company and beg to leave, would despise him for his unthinking cruelty and hate him for his madness. That his deepest desire was not omnipotence, but to awaken from every dream coiled in Harry's embrace. He felt sick with the weight of it all, nauseous with the dizzying, awful truth.

A hysterical, broken sound bubbled past Harry's lips. It was several moments before Voldemort realised that it was a laugh. "After everything I've done... after I abandoned *everything* to leave with you... after everything... you really think..." That astonished, dazed smile was still on his lips. Then warm hands slid up Voldemort's jaw, and Harry's mouth was pressed against his, his tongue like honey and salt in the Dark Lord's mouth. And then Harry released him. "You've put me through *hell*, and I still came. You tortured me - you... you killed people I care about very deeply... and I still left everything so that I could *be* with you! And if you think there's anything you could possibly do that would still surprise me - as unlikely as that is - I would still be here. Because... because I love you. I do. You're utterly

impossible, and I *still* love you, and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

It could not be true, *it could not*. Yet he saw nothing but truth looking out at him from within Harry's mind. *I love you*. And Lord Voldemort, who had poured scorn on such sentiment all his life, was flawed by the faith of this dear creature, whose skin held his most precious treasure. Voldemort could not give Harry the same emotion that shone from those weeping emerald eyes, but neither could he deny the effect of the boy's speech. Eternal, unalterable devotion ... that was what the Dark Lord demanded of his followers and what so very few of them gave, though their many professions of loyalty had offered him no falsehood. He would never allow himself to make such a mistake again.

"If this body were destroyed, you would search for me," he murmured carefully ... precisely ... his softly whispered words deadly ultimata. "*You would do all that was necessary to restore Lord Voldemort, regardless of consequence?*"

"You wouldn't get that far!" Harry replied fiercely, green eyes burning up at him. "I would never let *anyone* - how could you think that I would ever let you -" The small fingers wrapped around his arms were almost painfully tight; the boy could not even bring himself to say the words. "And even if you did... even if - somehow, some way, that actually happened... do you honestly think I could live with myself, knowing you were - out there, like that? *Suffering?* After I've been in your head - after I've seen what it was like for you? It wouldn't matter if you'd been the biggest git in the world before it happened... I... I wouldn't last a day..."

Voldemort gave a long shivering exhale that released something ancient and unnameable from the recesses of his soul. He finally saw why Dumbledore venerated this *love* ... if that was truly what it was ... the way it flowed from his mind down through his sinews like the tingling warmth of casting an Unforgivable Curse. His precious Horcrux, his brave, irrepressible Gryffindor. Tears were running down his flat face ... doubtless due to the boy's emotions ... and he embraced Harry, giddy with eagerness and heedless of all but his soul's most beautiful vessel. "*You shall want for nothing!*" he hissed, a fierce susurrus of Parseltongue, "*Lord Voldemort shall spread the world at the feet of his... his beloved.*" His heart smarted with something achingly new and raw with promise. "*Everything you desire...*"

For the first time, Harry found it was *he* who was overwhelmed by Voldemort's happiness. Tom's emotion filled his soul as ocean water permeates sand. It was as wild and uncontrollable as the very worst of Voldemort's rages, but instead of weighing him down, Harry felt as though he were soaring, soaring on the highest cloud...

Frantically, he searched for any trace of the artifice he had sensed there earlier in the lagoon. If Voldemort was still lying... if he was keeping anything else from him...

But there was nothing. Harry felt a dark, unexpected rush of power. He was suddenly certain that this man, the most powerful sorcerer of centuries past, would truly move mountains and waste cities for him. And for one long, terrible moment, Harry was just as certain that he would do the same - that he would sacrifice any number of things for this wonderful, fragile thing Voldemort was offering him. Harry, who was forever aware of the thousands of lives hanging over his head, thought in that moment that he might truly be able to forget about them all for the sake of this broken creature baring his heart just for him, for Harry.

But maybe... maybe that wouldn't be necessary. That same sense of power grew darker and more alluring as the possibility of it all unfurled before him. *Lord Voldemort shall spread the world at the feet of his... his beloved.* How much would Voldemort truly do for him? And - infinitely more terrifying - how much would *Harry* do for Lord Voldemort? Was *this* what love was - this willingness to sacrifice everything that was dear to him if it would make Tom tremble and smile this way?

"So you'll... really stay here, then, with me?" Harry dared, holding the long, pale face in his hands; the Dark Lord's tears leaking between his fingers. "You'll truly stop the war?"

Would he, Lord Voldemort, give up all that was within his grasp for this boy? The Basilisk's silvery whisper rang in Harry's ears, joined by the other voices, whose vicious murmurs had always stoked Voldemort's fear and megalomania. The Dark Lord bit his thin lip, blank, crimson eyes utterly deranged, and Harry was sure he was going to do something terrible. But then Voldemort nodded, his breath shivering against Harry's fingers. He hissed, as though in pain, and his tall body contorted: fingers twitched, shoulders hunched, limbs tightened. "If... if that is what you wish."

"I wish for us to be *happy*," said Harry quietly, pleadingly. "You don't

need to kill people to be happy... haven't I shown you that? We can just be happy - like this. Together. Can't we?"

"I have told you, I..." Voldemort paused, soft words trailing off into silence. Then his lipless mouth curled slowly into an equally soft, strange smile. "What did you feel, Harry, when you first played Quidditch?"

Harry might have laughed if he weren't suddenly feeling so miserable. "I don't think that's quite the same thing. Quidditch doesn't *kill* people."

"It has, on occasion."

Harry glared at him. "Tom."

The red eyes *glared* back. "I shall not make promises I cannot keep! Is it not enough that I, the Heir of Slytherin, would abandon my ambition for your sake? *Is it not enough? Must you demand everything and leave me without even my name?*"

"You aren't the only one who's making sacrifices!" Harry shot back, temper rising, because for just a few, tantalising moments Harry had been so sure... there had been *hope*... He withdrew, scowling. "I'm walking away from everything I've ever known for you! But you're telling me you can't do the same for me, even when - even when you just said... Can't you understand why that's upsetting?"

"*I did not lie!*" Voldemort shrieked, flinching back as though scalded. "I am in thrall to you, Harry Potter, you render so many of my desires empty shadows of their former significance... but I cannot alter my very nature at your convenience!"

"It's not about *convenience!*" Harry yelled. "Did you forget already how many people you've killed? People that I *care* about? This happens to be *really important to me!*"

He turned away suddenly, breathing harshly. He was beginning to get the urge to grab the nearest piece of hexed detritus and smash it against the wall, and he knew from Hermione that this was about the time for him to start counting to ten.

A pale hand touched his arm. Voldemort was shaking his head, the livid eyes empty. His high, chilly voice was infinitely gentle. Almost sad. "I do not know what you imagine me to be, dear one, but I am glad of it."

Harry breathed out angrily through his nose. "I know what you *can* be. You said you'd let me help you get there... but you've got to *listen* to me first!"

Long fingers seized one of the jars above Harry's head and for a second he thought Voldemort was going to smash it, but instead the Dark Lord took out what looked like a marinated rodent and placed it on the bench. With an elegant gesture, the mouse moved its head and its swollen body twitched like an Inferius. Then Voldemort's right hand came down with a loud *smack*, flattening the reanimated creature and splattering them both with brine.

"What the *hell-?!*" Harry leapt backward. In a moment of silent shock, he peeled some slimy mouse innards off his glasses, stomach turning. So *that's* how Voldemort wanted to play? Scowling, Harry whirled around and scanned the items on the shelf, grabbed a suitably expensive-looking jar, and hurled it across the room. It exploded against the wall, bezoars bouncing in every direction. "IS THIS HOW WE LISTEN, THEN?"

"IT'S MORE EFFECTIVE THAN YOUR FOOLISH MUDBLOOD'S SYSTEM OF COUNTING TO TEN!" Voldemort raged as another of the jars exploded.

Harry saw red. "DON'T TALK ABOUT HERMIONE LIKE THAT!" Roaring, he charged forward, grabbing Voldemort by the robes and knocking him against a wall. An entire shelf of books came crashing to the ground; one of them began to emit an eerie high-pitched wail.

"I SHALL SPEAK OF HER IN ANY WAY I WISH!" Voldemort screamed back at him.

"NO - YOU - WON'T!" Harry shouted, pounding Voldemort's robes with every word, his face bright red with anger.

Suddenly Harry was flying across the room on a wave of furious magic, ending up a sore, sprawling heap of angry wizard in the bedroom doorway. "I AM LORD VOLDEMORT AND YOU WILL BE SILENT!" And Harry was still yelling right back at him that no, *he would bloody well not*, but nothing was coming out of his mouth. And then, behind him, he heard the sound of something slithering across the floor, as enraged as Voldemort, and *coming for him*.

"You see, human? Master always lets Nagini rip them, lets Nagini eat them in the end... yes, yes..."

"No!" There was a crack and Voldemort was between him and the psychotic snake - not that there was much difference between them right now - and it took Harry a moment to register that the Dark Lord was now hissing murderously at Nagini instead of him.

Well, that was more than enough for Harry. Red-faced and furious - and still, to his infinite frustration, unable to speak - he sprang to his feet and flew out the front door. It slammed behind him so loudly that he was sure he heard another jar fall and break behind him.

It was only when Lord Voldemort had finished with Nagini, who had slithered under the bed in a fit of pique, that he realised Harry had gone. His first impulse was panic: one of his Horcruxes was *missing* ... he knew not where ... but then he realised that Potter was in no position to escape the confines of the atoll. The boy had little to no knowledge of long-distance apparition and the nearest island was many miles away by broomstick. Only if Harry had not returned by nightfall, would the Dark Lord search for him.

He took in the chaos his once orderly rooms had been reduced to and felt an unexpected pang of nostalgia. This place had incubated so much learning; had witnessed the end of his youth and his growth as an adult sorcerer. Books, ingredients, jars, and alchemical components were strewn mangled and broken across the floor: his genesis in pieces. His tongue itched and he swallowed against a dry throat. If he did not clean up this mess, many of the substances would stain, or mix to adverse effect. One of his grimoires was still wailing.

Only limited magic could be used when dealing with so many potent reagents and magical objects in their own right, and thus the majority of the mess would have to be dealt with by hand, but it did not trouble Lord Voldemort. Such an exercise would give him time to reflect upon the circumstances in which he now found himself.

His notes on the ophiolatry traditions of Parselmouths in Burkina Faso had been ruined ... the parchment soggy with oddly flammable, foul-smelling marinating fluid, but everything else was mostly salvageable. It was strange in ways he had not before considered, to be so intimate with the words and thoughts of the young wizard he had once been. He read half an essay he had written on the creation of Inferi and skimmed through his first, rudimentary ideas for a charm that enabled true flight.

Silvery fluid dripped from an upper shelf onto the bench below and

Voldemort ran a pale finger through the unicorn blood pooling on the countertop. So much separated him from the wizard whose sanctuary this had been. Too much had been lost for too long. And Voldemort realised that a great part of him was still trapped in an Albanian forest. All the energy this brilliant young sorcerer had devoted to exploration and knowledge had become lost in the necessity to reclaim what had been ripped from him. And, in the process, Voldemort had become something stagnant in action and thought.

This repugnant notion disturbed him greatly and, in the wake of his recalcitrant Horcrux, caused him ... for the first time since he lost his powers so many years ago ... to truly consider his desires. Did he *want* to return to what he had been at the height of what was now being called the First Wizarding War? *Our dreams are simple, our connection is simple... ruling the world isn't simple.* So much of what had pleased him then he now found repulsive. The Death Eaters who had worshipped his genius had betrayed him and those faithful few who had not denied their allegiance had foolishly allowed themselves to be captured by the Ministry.

He had imagined, once, that conquest would fill the void which had always existed within him. Then the bitterness of such eviscerating defeat as had been inflicted upon him removed all else but the compulsion to return and *win*. There had been nothing else. Voldemort vanished the remains of the dead mouse from his fingernails. *I am Lord Voldemort.* His mantra, his promise to himself the he could not ... *would not* ... be defeated; that any obstacle he faced could be overcome by sheer force of will. What had once been a testament of his capacity to endure had now become an ossifying crutch ... the desperate coping mechanism of a mind that could not bear to admit defeat ... for that would mean falling short of the ideal he had forged for himself; yet it had caused the ruin of his imagination, which had been so cruelly curtailed by that torturous, formless existence.

Life was not simply a course to be plotted. It was a constant metamorphosis of mind, body, and soul ... governed by luck and chance. Not even the most accomplished seer or strategist could predict the consequences of even the most minor actions. In such a world, those who were static ... who refused to adapt to circumstances ... would not survive; such were the laws of nature. And, in a choice between his ambitions and his Horcruxes, there was simply no contest. Once he ceased to be limited by the need to reclaim his old life, to be once more the implacable He-Who-Must-Be-Named, it was apparent that Harry had brought him far more joy than his short reign over Wizarding Britain ever had. The boy had shown him things he could

never have imagined possible.

He could not be all of what Harry wanted him to become, but Voldemort could at least cease to cling to what he had been. And if the boy had truly meant what he had said, then he would surely not draw undue issue with Voldemort's murderous impulses and fascination with Dark magic, as long as he left Potter's friends in peace.

Armed with such realisations, Lord Voldemort left his once-more pristine rooms and stepped out into the night seeking his errant Horcrux.

The southern firmament glittered above the Dark Lord as he glided along the beach, white skin and white sand almost blue in the moonlight. The sweep and lap of the sea soothed Voldemort's nerves as he walked at the edge of the surf, pale toes sinking into wet sand to be washed by the sea, his black robes furling and unfurling behind him like a streaming banners in the salty breeze.

Potter was standing some distance away, staring out at the ocean. Voldemort did not hurry toward him, but set himself a leisurely pace, taking in the cool, sea air. He had waited all afternoon and into the evening. A few minutes more would make little difference.

In a rustle of wind-curled silk, the Dark Lord finally moved to stand beside Harry. He did not speak. Rather, he slid the tip of a finger down the back of Harry's neck, sliding a bead of pleasure between them. He would not apologise.

Harry's anger had long since left him, carried away with the breeze and the retreating tide. He had been content to lose himself in the sharp scent of ocean water, the gentle wind carding through his hair and washing over his face. He was not sure how long he had been standing there.

He felt Voldemort before he heard him, a black, familiar aura rolling silently across the beach. Harry's bare skin prickled in the night air, and he drew a long breath, tasting the salt on his tongue. He did not open his eyes as he sensed Voldemort settling beside him, full of dark and silent power.

A cool touch against the back of his neck; goose flesh rippled across his skin from the point of contact outward. Harry still did not open his eyes. "Did I... break anything?"

"Nothing significant," Voldemort said lightly, his high, soft voice almost lost in the hiss of the sea.

The smallest of smiles tugged at Harry's mouth. "Damn. I suppose I'm out of practice."

"Ah, well. I am certain there will be many such opportunities in the future." Voldemort sounded almost amused.

"Not if your snake eats me first."

"Nagini is stubborn, but she obeys my wishes," there was an implied *unlike you* in Voldemort's chilly tone.

Harry opened his eyes. The sea was black and endless before him, stretching out in every direction. He processed for the first time that the sun had set. "Must be nice, to have someone thinking about those."

"It was, once, but the novelty wears off after half a century..." The crimson eyes gleamed in the darkness.

If only the novelty of enslaving Britain's Muggle population might also wear off eventually. Harry exhaled sharply, staring hard at the indistinguishable line where sea and sky embraced one another. There was a long moment of silence, and then - "Look, I shouldn't have shouted at you," he forced out, before Voldemort had a chance to change Harry's mind.

"Thank you," Voldemort replied courteously and then ruined it with "I am glad you recognise your error."

Harry finally turned to look at him, incredulous. "*And?*"

He could just make out the lipless mouth twitching. "Well, it was abysmal behaviour on your part. I have seen hinkypunks do better. You really *are* out of practice. Anyone would think you were enjoying yourself."

Harry just barely caught himself before he started smiling. Barely. "This is usually the part where, you know, the other person apologises too."

"Is it?" Voldemort's voice was thick with innocent astonishment.

"Well, if you'd rather, I s'pose I could show you the *right* way to destroy someone's rooms first."

The Dark Lord stared down at him haughtily. "I hardly think that, of the two of us, *you* are the authority on violence."

"No, but I reckon I'm pretty good at getting under your skin." A small smile broke through after all.

"True..." Voldemort hissed out what sounded like a sigh of resignation. But just when Harry thought the Dark Lord might actually offer some meaningful comment on what had happened between them today, he suddenly added "Although technically, dear Harry, as I have possessed you a number of times-"

Harry grabbed the front of Voldemort's robes before he could go any further and kissed him harshly on the mouth. He had only intended to shut Voldemort up - *impossible bloody git* - but the starved connection sparked and soothed between them, gradually eroding what bitterness remained from their argument. Harry's irritation reluctantly slipped away as the kiss became tender, his arms slinking around the long, pale neck.

The apology was in Voldemort's mouth and tongue; gentle and solicitous, and so far removed from the Dark Lord who had shrieked and raged. There was a quietude to Voldemort's aura, an acceptance that Harry had never felt before. Kisses and thoughts mingled in the darkness and Voldemort let out a long hiss of pleasure that sent tingles right down Harry's spine.

He felt an unexpected wave of relief. This was something familiar, Voldemort's scent cold and crisp in his lungs, the shape and pressure of his mouth moving so slowly against Harry's own. This was an expression of affection - of *love* - that they had mastered long ago, even if they hadn't realised it then for what it was. Harry remembered the warmth that had gathered at his fingertips as they had lain, in awe of each other, on a floor full of glass - the fluttering in his chest as he'd held a tiny, wheezing Voldemort to his heart, stroking a trembling, miniature hand... things were so much simpler between them when Voldemort didn't open his mouth and ruin everything.

But they had spoken today, hadn't they? And Voldemort... Voldemort hadn't simply raged at him the entire time. *His beloved*. Harry's chest ached with something so sweet it was almost painful. He hadn't quite been able to bring himself to believe it this morning, especially with the shouting match that had followed... but here under the night sky, with Voldemort's slow kisses coaxing his anger from his heart, the ocean vast and unending before them, the reality of Tom's declaration

finally began to settle within him. Anything seemed possible.

"Tell me again." The request was carried more on thought than speech, so softly was it murmured against Voldemort's lips.

"*I love you*," Voldemort whispered back, his high voice airy, as though the three words were of no consequence to either of them - tossed lightly away on the wind - as though they did not change everything.

When, in his third year, Professor Lupin had asked Harry to find a happy memory to produce his Patronus, Harry had tried to recall the most exciting things that had ever happened to him. Winning Gryffindor the House Championship... the first time he had ever flown... But Harry hadn't known then that happiness could also be found in something so quiet and simple as this - that it didn't have to gallop out of him in adrenaline-fuelled exhilaration. That it could be this slow and shivering warmth spreading through his body, filling him up with light. He had never been one to appreciate the little moments, the way Hermione could - he was always rushing headfirst into his next adventure.

Yet he could say with confidence that he had never loved anything so fiercely as he did in the silence, the perfect stillness of that moment.

"Do you remember... when you said I must want to be bound to anyone else in the world but you?" Harry asked him quietly. "Well, you were wrong. I'm glad it was you."

The cool, silken skin of Lord Voldemort's palm brushed against Harry's cheek. "I too, am glad..." Voldemort hissed softly. "It is extraordinary, *this*..." the word tapered off and the tips of the Dark Lord's tongue nestled in the curve of Harry's ear.

Harry exhaled unsteadily, his head rolling unconsciously on his shoulders. The cool sea breeze kissed his bared throat. "I thought at first it was just because we're - connected... but it's more than that... because even if we weren't, you'd still be able to make me *feel* like... like *this*..."

He was enfolded in silk that smelt of salt, musk, spice, and the peculiarly dark, smoky scent that was all Voldemort's own. "Yes..." the hiss caressed him possessively as Voldemort's flat face pressed into Harry's messy hair. "*Mine, mine, mine*..."

And Harry, for once, did not feel the need to object. He no longer felt as though Voldemort were trying to take something from him; Harry

was instead giving him some small and secret part of himself in exchange for this incredible thing they'd discovered together. "*Yours*," he echoed softly in Parseltongue, and something, some heavy, nameless weight lifted from his body as he did so. He felt physically lighter as he leaned into Voldemort's embrace, breathing deeply against the light, silken robes. "But that means you're mine as well," he added with a touch of obstinacy, grinning softly into Voldemort's shoulder.

"Of course," came the velvety smooth voice, "if you will have me."

Harry raised his eyes to meet Voldemort's, playfulness forgotten. The Dark Lord's burning gaze seemed to glow almost purple in the moonlight. "All of you," he promised softly, and he sensed that something strange and powerful was happening with his magic - a stirring in the centre of his being, somewhere near the glowing Horcrux which was wrapped in the swathes of Harry's own spirit. "I already swore I'd take care of your soul, didn't I?"

"You *are* my soul," Voldemort answered gravely, fingers trailing worshipfully down Harry's naked torso. Harry shivered as the ocean flung a wave further up the shore, cool water washing over their bare feet. That wonderful warmth Harry had experienced before - *I love you* - rushed through him again tenfold, so much so that he was physically dizzy with it.

Slowly, leisurely, his body arched beneath the long, beautiful hands sliding across his skin. His spine was a locked bow, muscles tense and quivering as he leaned into Voldemort's fleeting touches. The salty air shuddered in Harry's lungs, and green eyes glanced up, dark and dilated. "Then... then you can have me, too."

"It seems we are in agreement," the Dark Lord - *Tom* - chuckled. Not the Dark Lord. There was nothing dark, nothing sinister in that soft, inviting sound. Nor in the lovely mouth that followed the trail of sensation left by Voldemort's hands down, *down* Harry's skin.

Harry trembled and gasped, fingers curling around Voldemort's shoulders. "For once," he said with a smile that quickly slackened in a hitch of breath. The twin tips of Voldemort's tongue drew parallel lines across his soft stomach, chasing butterflies beneath the skin. Harry wondered briefly how he could have ever found Voldemort monstrous, how he had ever seen him as anything but lovely - how did people even settle for tongues with only one point, anyway? - and then his toes were digging into the damp sand as one of Voldemort's

arms slid around his waist, pulling him forward so that his navel met the eager, lipless mouth.

Harry was so distracted by this development that he nearly didn't notice when long fingers started creeping up his thigh. It wasn't until they brushed, teasing, against his swim trunks that - in an extraordinary display of resolve - Harry forced himself to pull away. "Wait," he hissed, yanking on Tom's shoulders - perhaps a bit too harshly, but he couldn't help it; his entire body felt strung tight enough to snap at any moment.

There was a frustrated hiss and Voldemort let go of him, leaving nothing but air between Harry and the sand. He flailed, trying to regain his balance, and then fell on his arse with a *thump*.

He bit back an expression of displeasure - *easy, Potter* - and pushed himself into a sitting position. Voldemort towered over him, the darkness shrouding his face, and Harry found, with a sudden and inexplicable burst of nerves, that he wished he could see what he looked like. Steeling himself, he rose to his knees, not quite touching Voldemort's body, simply hovering there with his face upturned to the moonlight. His voice was rough and unfamiliar with desire. "I would... very much like to touch you, if you'll let me."

Strangely, he heard the two words a second before Voldemort said them. "*You may*," came the answer; it couldn't have been more different from the haughty tones of command he remembered. Harry, who had mostly been expecting a refusal, rocked backward for a moment, stunned. He wished more than ever that he could have seen Voldemort's face in that moment. Would his eyes be narrowed at Harry with the same distrust and discomfort that had torn him away at Rookwood's house... or was he finally at ease? Well, if he wasn't, Harry vowed that he'd help him get there.

"Thank you," he breathed, both an expression of gratitude and a promise. Slowly, as though handling an easily startled animal, he reached out, took hold of one thin, skeletal wrist, and brought it forward. His warm lips brushed tender, fluttering kisses across each knuckle.

Harry Potter was seated at his feet, lips drawing slowly across Voldemort's hand, as though in homage. The Dark Lord might have laughed had not each tender caress stolen his breath anew. The incoming tide surged over his bare feet and caught the hem of his

robes. In the darkness, with his senses open to sensation, Voldemort was in his element. The crash of the ocean and the rustling of the palms mingled with the saline scents of seaweed and desiccated coral; Harry's kisses fused with the softly chirping insects and the vast, distant glitter of the stars.

The soft lips lingered for a moment at the very termination of Voldemort's long digits: a small, warm tongue pressing against the pad of his forefinger in an open-mouthed kiss. Then they fell away, carrying with them a serpentine sigh, as Harry pulled himself to his feet. Voldemort saw, in the sharp light of the waxing moon, that the boy's naked chest was still flushed and bellied with the effects of his own ministrations.

Calloused hands grasped the Dark Lord's face. Harry pulled Voldemort forward until those dear lips grazed just against his mouth, slowly brushing back and forth with every slight movement Harry made. The tip of the boy's nose touched the edges his quivering nostrils. "Thank you," the fond, grateful whisper came again. And then those hands began to move, dragging slowly, reverently across his eyelids, his ears, his chin, his scalp, his mouth - as though starved for the feel of his flesh, setting his nerve-endings and the Horcrux between them alight with longing. They touched Voldemort's trembling throat, pressing gently against the febrile throb of his pulse. The boy swallowed, his pupils visibly dilate, the green eyes blazing in the dark as they silently implored Lord Voldemort for leave to continue.

Wet silk stuck to his legs and he shivered, arching his neck into that caress, utterly careless of his damp robes. Hot breath shuddered against his throat, followed by lips osculating a slow path up to the lobe of Voldemort's ear. Hands ran across his jutting ribs thence to fist dark cloth with a growing impatience echoed beneath the Dark Lord's skin. A raw voice growled in his ear: "Perhaps we could... get rid of these?"

"Ah... of course..." Voldemort hissed, bending over to pull the garment off over his head. The wind licked at his nakedness, but some unknown, interior heat was burning beneath his cold skin, allaying his nerves. He drew away from the boy and the waves, and laid his robes out carefully across the sand. Shorn of silk, the Dark Lord was a tall, thin string of giddy mooncalf, the pallor of him luminous. The livid, crimson eyes glowed like those of a tiger as he turned back towards Harry and looked into that emerald gaze and *saw himself*.

And he was Harry, and he could not tear his eyes away from marble

skin softened by the darkness, so pale it seemed to radiate moonlight. *Beautiful* - there was no other word for it. So far removed from humanity that it moved *beyond* beauty. His - *Harry's* - fingers twitched with the need to touch this creature, *everywhere*, to gather every place that made him hiss and gasp until every inch of that lovely, sand-white skin was buzzing with helpless desire; his need was Voldemort's need, his lust was Voldemort's lust.

He forced himself to swallow - to breathe - to not launch himself across the beach so quickly that Voldemort would slap him away and seize control of the situation again. This was a precious gift, and he was not going to screw this up.

"Just to be clear," he said slowly, in a warm, low voice that was not his own, his mouth dry with lust, "When I said that I wanted to touch you, I meant that I'd like to touch you... everywhere. The way you've touched me." The image of himself, thin limbs sprawled across black silk, writhing and hissing beneath Harry's hands and mouth, engulfed Voldemort like Fiendfyre. He squirmed, forcing the boy's thoughts away, simultaneously embarrassed and aroused by their detail. "You're sure that that's - all right?"

"I..." How astonishing it was to have mere thoughts caress his body, to sigh as phantom pleasures were painted across his flesh by Harry's eyes. To be subject and object at once, debauched by imagination.

Confusion suddenly tinged the pleasure thick in the night air. The boy's teeth dug into his bottom lip, his hands stiff and unnatural at his sides - clearly restraining himself. "But if it makes you uncomfortable..."

"*Hardly*." He sat down on his robes, stretching out his long legs. "It is merely that I... *that I...*" How utterly astonishing and frustrating it was to be embodied, to have limbs that quivered uncontrollably at the behest of so little!

Harry moved toward him, a stark, slender silhouette against the moonlit sea. The air seemed to shift and spark between them as the boy slowly, *slowly* knelt, knees carefully astride him without brushing against his skin. Yet although they did not touch, Voldemort could feel the near-feverish heat emanating from Harry's flushed flesh as the young man sat, suspended just above him. A barely imperceptible tremble ran through those fingers as they stroked, feather-light, down the Dark Lord's neck once more, halting where Voldemort's robes had previously concealed his protruding collar bone. "That you... what?"

"*Everywhere...*" the Dark Lord murmured in broken, delirious Parseltongue, "*Everything... you shall...*" He kept his dignity, refusing to curve upward into that heat, eventually resorting to: "*I command you...*!" To his immense shame, it bore more resemblance to a supplication than an order.

Through the darkness, Voldemort's eyes could make out Harry's mouth slowly curling into a smile. "You command me? I don't think it quite works that way..." Warm fingers scraped up his abdomen as the boy leaned into him, still not quite touching, and the end of Harry's nose teased at his ear. "You're supposed to ask me nicely."

His whole body twitched, straining against his will. "*I have seen your thoughts, Harry... do not dare make this a game of prevarication!*"

Soft laughter rolled over his ear in a rush of hot air. "Hmm... that didn't sound very nice to me." The boy began to kiss his neck, slowly, his hands settling on Voldemort's own so that he was leaning completely over him; lovely, naked flesh so near that the Dark Lord would need only arch his spine to bring them into contact. The bare inch of space between them seemed to tremble and shudder with heat. "You can do better than that, I think," Harry's low voice murmured, vibrating against his throat.

Voldemort wanted to thrash this insolent boy. How *dare* Potter play such a game with him! It was not to be tolerated ... Lord Voldemort would not allow himself to be mocked in such a way. But that would require movement, which would mean that Harry might *stop*... He let out a plaintive hiss, undulating like a restless serpent. "I am *not* nice," he spat out when it became too much to bear, "I am Lord Voldemort, and you will give up this irreverence or I shall... *I shall...*" But there was no warning he could offer his Horcrux, no appropriate punishment with which to threaten. Fear flitted across his features at being so helpless, so devoid of threat. *You can't have both*. There would be no recourse on this path, he realised, love was like splitting one's soul ... it left no room for retreat or remorse. This must be what it was to have a friend ... a companion one could not force into submission ... he wondered how anyone could stand it.

And Harry *knew it*. The warm lips and tongue left the crook of his neck, and there was no trace of concession on the boy's stubborn features as the green eyes bored into his; indeed, Harry's smile seemed to grow even more sly. "You're making this a lot more difficult than it needs to be..." The infuriating child pressed his scar to Voldemort's forehead, a bone-deep shock of connection searing through his body,

and their breath mingled, the taste of Harry's desire thick in his serpentine nostrils. "*I could make you feel so nice...*"

Nice was an utterly inadequate term for describing how Harry could make him feel; an insipid understatement which could never be equal to the unnamed, untold wonders coursing between himself and Harry. *Asking nicely, feeling nice...* Lord Voldemort rejected such vocabulary in favour of yanking his wrists out from under Harry's with an inchoate hiss and greedily wrapping himself around his Horcrux, mouth, hands, and feet all moving in frenzied abandon.

Harry, who had been determined to extract at least *some* kind of request from Lord Voldemort's mouth, was suddenly consumed by the sensation of all that skin pressing closer than close, cold, naked limbs clinging to his body. His will broke; they went surging forward, and he pressed Tom down into the sand with a series of deep, biting kisses, hands swallowing every bit of skin they could get at with a hunger Harry hadn't known he could possess. He rocked his hips forward against Voldemort's with blinding-white perfect pressure that sent spots dancing in front of his eyes, and he gasped and panted against the lipless mouth, the arm supporting his weight nearly giving out.

This, then, was the source of so much sacrifice. This haze of limbs digging, thrashing, giving, taking ... and this time he did not sink into Harry's thoughts, but clung desperately to the slap of flesh, the heave of breath ... the fierce, hedonistic reality of this new metamorphosis he had begun. Long fingers curled knots into wild, black hair and nails drew pink lines up young skin, all the while his mouth found every trembling moment of transformation and claimed them for eternity.

It was too much. Harry forced himself away before he lost himself too soon in the feeling of Voldemort's hips, rubbing, *rubbing* against the hardest and softest part of him, and raised himself up on his knees. Voldemort objected with a long, keening hiss, which Harry cut off with another kiss. Only then did he finally let himself move down Tom's long body.

"Everywhere, hm?" The thin chest was rapidly rising and falling with shallow breaths, smooth skin stretching tight across sharp and jutting ribs. "I s'pose I can manage that..." Harry closed his eyes as he placed a long kiss over the furiously pounding heart, nuzzled his nose where another man would have a nipple; fingers cupping and stroking the fragile ribcage as they might a delicate baby bird. Voldemort's torso

was one long stretch of lovely skin uninterrupted by the markings of other mammals.

Harry's mouth moved lower, lower, *down* the quivering, concave stomach, restless fingers still trailing across Tom's sides. He didn't think he could be any more aroused - until he finally came up upon Voldemort's long, straining sex. Fresh desire ripped through him like an electric shock. He'd never understood why anyone would ever want to put something like *that* in their mouth until this very moment, when he wanted to so badly that he was lightheaded and dry-mouthed with it. "I need to - can I - is this -" he babbled, hardly knowing what he was saying, fingers trembling and twitching as they hovered above Voldemort's arousal.

"Yessss..." Voldemort murmured, arching upward towards Harry, and it was *yes* like *Wingardium Leviosa*, lifting Harry into the air ... *yes* like the waves crashing against the sand ... *yes* like the instinctual hiss of *open*, which opened everything of Voldemort's to Harry: sinks, doors, emerald-eyed serpents, and *legs*... awed, he ran a hand affectionately up a beautifully smooth, long, moon-pale thigh.

He had to close his eyes for a moment - *breathe* - his heart beating so hard and heavy that it seemed to lurch and jump in his chest. Once he'd gotten himself together, Harry reached out slowly, tentatively, and traced his fingers across the entire length of him, the way he knew he himself liked to be touched, starting out. It was smooth and tepid, and seemed to swell impossibly at the brush of his Harry's skin. Encouraged, Harry leaned forward and followed the path of his fingers with the tip of his tongue, hot, unsteady breath washing across Voldemort as Harry exhaled through his nose. He gave a curious, investigative lick at the foreskin.

Voldemort let out a shuddering hiss from behind clenched teeth that seemed to gather hot and low in Harry's stomach. Tom's dark, musky scent seemed to fill up his entire body; he couldn't get enough of it. Harry breathed in deeply, nuzzling against him. He lapped at the head which peeked out from beneath the sleeve of dark foreskin - spurred on by the way Voldemort's hips tensed and jerked, long, white hands clawing restlessly at the sand. Harry's fingers wrapped around hard flesh then and pulled Voldemort into his mouth, trying to lick and suck the way Tom had showed him. His tongue buzzed and curled with Voldemort's pleasure, with the connection that shivered across both their souls.

And Voldemort *wanted it* - Harry could feel his need burning like hot

ice through his scar, could feel the ghost of his own mouth, moving across Tom's skin, the pleasure bleeding from Voldemort's mind into Harry's. Voldemort, who had never been touched by anyone - who had never *wanted* anyone - was unfolding beneath him, desire and magic and pleasure seeping from his quivering flesh and washing over Harry's body in warm, tingling waves.

He could hear teeth grinding and Tom cried out - and Harry wouldn't be able to bring himself to stop if the ocean swept up and swallowed them both, if the entire world burst suddenly into flames - there was nothing, nothing but the two of them, nothing but the small, desperate noises pulled out of those thin lips and Voldemort's musky scent and the heat and weight of him in Harry's mouth. He opened his eyes, then, to drink in the sight of Lord Voldemort, stretched out across the sand, full of the tension of sex and want - want for *Harry* -

Look at me, Harry demanded silently, and Tom's eyes cracked open in his pale face - dark and wild, two bright, throbbing nerves exposed to the night air. And Harry groaned, hands suddenly fumbling, because he could *feel what Tom was feeling*. The rough stroke of his tongue, the sharp scrape of teeth, the heat of his mouth sliding over and over and over again -

Harry's hand slipped down between his legs and he shoved himself clumsily into his own grip, shuddering and moaning and unable to stop, never, ever, ever - wanting Tom to want this - to want *him* - and, oh god oh god, to pleasure Tom every night, to kiss him and touch him and love him and fuck him, Harry would do it all, would do anything, everything -

And Tom was spilling into his mouth, the shock of it like something hot and perfect ripping inside of him, and Harry released him with a loud, shuddering gasp - "Oh god oh god," he babbled, stroking himself desperately, pressing his forehead hard into Voldemort's hip, "oh yes yes yes *Tom yes* -"

Afterward, Harry curled up beside him, breathing deep and long into Tom's neck. "Yes," he murmured breathlessly, over and over, "yes," to his belly, "yes," to his bony chin, "yes," as he nuzzled his ear, bare leg draped over Tom's longer ones, while the flesh beneath him lay still and languid.

He pushed himself up on an elbow, after some long, lingering moments, to look at Voldemort's face. He noticed, for the first time, that something was dribbling from the corners of Tom's mouth.

Opaque and glistening, it steamed oddly against the white flesh, dripping down to bead poisonously on his collar.

"Are you - all right?" Harry's voice was hoarse and suddenly uncertain.

"Yes, yes... it is nothing..." There was colour in Tom's sharp cheeks, rising blue-purple like a bruise.

"But your mouth - it's... dripping..." Against his better judgement, Harry reached out and dipped his finger in it, but it did not burn or scald his skin; it was simply very hot to the touch.

"It is a legacy of my rebirth, nothing more," Voldemort sighed and Harry saw that his mouth, his canines were glistening with the same, strange substance, opaque like venom and glistening in the moonlight like unicorn's blood... *oh...*

Voldemort did not stop him as Harry gathered the venom in his fingertips and brought them to his mouth, sucking them clean. It burned his tongue like tea drunk too soon, musk and molten metal - *blood*. Tom looked away, red eyes gleaming out at the dark ocean. "Venom, flesh, blood, and bone... a body crafted and sustained in such a way will always be bound by the nature of its ingredients."

It suddenly occurred to him that Voldemort was *embarrassed*. Without thinking, Harry leaned forward and kissed him hard on the mouth. His tongue lapped at the edges of his thin lips, licking away the poison. He continued to fondle Tom as they kissed, long, slow strokes that made Harry's stomach flutter, and more venom suddenly leaked onto his tongue, hot and acidic. "That's..." Harry stopped kissing him for a moment, tasting the poison in his mouth, hand stilling over Voldemort's sex. "That's... really bloody hot. *Wow.*"

"*You... you do not mind?*"

"Mind?" Harry stared at him. "Of course I don't mind!" A look of confusion came over his flushed face. "But I don't think you did that last time that we... y'know... did you?"

"No... I did not lose control in such a way." Voldemort's gaunt face was pensive and curiously sad, "Forgive me, even I am surprised, on occasion, by the fact that I am no longer human."

Harry felt a sharp pang of longing. He grasped Voldemort's face in his hands. "If you weren't human, you wouldn't be able to feel, or laugh, or - love. And those are the best parts about being human to begin

with." Cold, white fingers brushed across Harry's lips. "I think you're lovely," he murmured in a low voice, kissing the tips of those fingers.

They fell away from his lips to be replaced by the two points of a tongue, which traced carefully the edges of Harry's mouth before twining with his own. And suddenly he was gazing through different eyes. Certain colours drained away to reveal perfect clarity of vision: he could see the hairs standing up on his own arms and, from the corner of his eye, grains of sand shifting as they snogged.

Memories not his own were coursing through him: *a handsome, dark haired boy leaning forward, frowning into a mirror, examining heavily bloodshot eyes ... running a hand through his hair and staring at the black and grey strands which clung to his fingers ... frail fingers pushing against the membrane of an egg ... hatching raw, trembling, and euphoric only to be greeted with twitching, shuddering disgust ... being dropped into a boiling stone cauldron, skin bubbling, agony melting into strong, lean fingers which gripped the rim of the cauldron and pulled him up into resurrection as he drew new, startlingly deep, breaths from the steaming air ... masked eyes widening, terrified of the ghoulish, red-eyed fiend who blazed in their weak minds ... he could smell the sick, sweaty stink of their fear and laughed aloud ... how colourless his hand was against the boy's pink, excited face ... and realised that he had forgotten, until now, that his body could be anything other than an instrument of terror. "Brilliant..." he whispered ... allowing himself to be gentled by the warmth that caressed his ear and was now stroking his hairless skull... He hardly knew what to say to such compliments.*

His beloved did not find this form strange, did not baulk even at the secretion of venom. "I find *you* beautiful, dear Harry; it is an impetuous attraction, ever in motion..." Harry murmured lovingly against his own flesh, "ever rushing ahead, heedless of its wake." *How he cherished this creature, this essential possession, his first and most precious friend...*

Harry watched his eyes flutter open, a dull, muted green in Voldemort's night-vision - and as they did Harry slipped back into his own mind. It was no longer the struggle it used to be, the ruthless battle for his own thoughts - rather, it was something like falling backward and effortlessly through a dark cloud, not unlike what it was to slip between dreaming and awake. But this was no dream, and Voldemort was still here, with him - real and lovely and *his*. "I dreamt about this, you know," he admitted softly. "Even when you weren't there with me."

How could he express the feverish delirium this boy had caused? The abject, disconsolate *fury*? He had not lingered, dreaming of this moment, but been driven to the edge of reason by it. Voldemort doubted that Harry would find the acts he had committed, in what had seemed then a permanent state of frustrated rage, romantic. "You, too, were ever in my thoughts."

Harry cringed against him in the darkness, and Voldemort realised too late that, left unguarded, his thoughts had spilt through their connection. "If we could just - y'know - *not* think about murdering people while we're snogging... that would be great."

He brushed his fingers up against Harry's left temple. "It is difficult," he said softly, "*you* may be my future, but there is much in my past, and my thoughts, which you will always find repugnant."

"Then we'll simply have to start fresh," Harry told him stubbornly.

"That is all very well for you to say, dear one. You are sixteen. I am no longer a young man. Rather, I am nearing my seventieth year, and though I am resolved to transform myself once more, such changes are neither fast, nor simple."

"You don't need to transform yourself." Harry's fingers slipped down the Dark Lord's thin chest, tracing the ribs that guarded the fluttering heart of this new body. "Everything you need is already here."

He reached out to grasp those fingers, squeezing them possessively, but was unable to speak. Voldemort swallowed, glancing away. Harry was very young and so much of him was still *in potentia*. He could not see what it was he was asking of Lord Voldemort.

"I know it must be hard - being trapped in the middle of it all," Harry's voice came, hardly above a whisper, thumb stroking Voldemort's hand. Inexplicably, the image of a huge, monstrous snake bled through Harry's thoughts. "But I'm looking in from the outside... and I see things that I don't think you have a clue about."

"I..." Had he truly become so stagnant as to be viewed as trapped? Voldemort had never considered himself as limited by his achievements, rather the opposite. He - who had ventured further than any other down the road that led to immortality - had scorned all obstacles in his path. Could Harry be referring to his mental instability, that cage of fury that encased him so often, or had he too seen what Voldemort had realised in the wake of their argument?

"You don't need to transform anything," Harry said again, softly. "I've seen every bit of you - even the parts you don't want to look at yourself. I've seen your soul, Tom, and it's..." His Horcrux's lips brushed against his own. "It's so much stronger than you think it is."

If it had been anything else, his mental acumen or his powers - so much of himself he had proudly honed to razor edged perfection - Voldemort would have immediately protested that he had *no doubt* of his strength, but *his soul*... the last week had shown him its exceptional frailty... its *weakness*. He had felt it flutter in the breach, so easily overwhelmed. He shook his head against Harry's mouth.

"It is," Harry insisted, cradling his face with his fingers, "it's been strangled and splintered and smothered and it is still *so strong*... I wish you could see..."

And he could feel it fluttering in his chest, its flame yearning helplessly toward Harry; an aching sliver. It had no power, it owned nothing but quivering sentiment. "How can you find in the weakest part of Lord Voldemort - so easily overridden by a simple touch by your hand - an example of strength?"

"I think it's the strongest part of you," Harry told him fiercely. "Without your soul... well, none of this would mean anything, would it? Everything would be... empty. Why would you want that?"

"Because," he whispered, "such things were always empty... always meaningless... until you."

And Harry's lips were against his, nails scraping down his throat, Harry's heart pounding in his mouth with a rush of longing that Voldemort felt in the soles of his feet. "Don't you feel it?" he said breathlessly against the Dark Lord's thin mouth. "It's the biggest thing I've ever felt. How could you think that it's *weak* -? It feels so - it feels -" *Overwhelming*. How could he describe the raw, absolute *novelty* of what lay beneath their skins? The shock of it that still sent him reeling.

Potter scrambled suddenly to his feet, kicking up sand as he did so. Voldemort's nakedness was abruptly left to the mercy of the cool ocean air. "Quickly," Harry said, "I've got an idea - I can prove it to you -"

The Dark Lord wrapped his arms about himself. He would have Harry continue to embrace him rather than demonstrate whatever had occurred to him. "What?" he asked, almost stirred to annoyance.

"Honestly," the boy said impatiently, "d'you need to make everything so difficult? I'm going to show you." Harry offered Voldemort his hand.

He took it, not because of where it would lead, but simply to clasp those warm fingers as he swayed to his feet against that enticing creature. "Are you complaining of the enjoyment I derive from our shared languor?"

Harry grinned at him in the moonlight. "I'm about to show you something better."

"*Better?*" Voldemort raised his brows in disbelief, "Now *this* I must see - lead on, dear one."

"You'll need your wand."

The Dark Lord smiled a predator's smile and summoned his wand of yew, "Oh...?" What magic could Harry possibly demonstrate that he, Lord Voldemort, did not already know? He drew his cloak around his shoulders to offer his nudity some small protection from the breeze as Harry pulled him gently up the beach, until Voldemort's toes sunk into wet sand and the cool shore flirted with their ankles.

The boy leaned back against him, pressing his warm, naked body flush against Voldemort's. Small hands took his wrists and pulled them around Harry's torso. All their movements seemed to have gained a wondrous ease as though, having been so entwined, no gesture either one of them could offer the other could ever be stilted or go unaccepted. Such ease Voldemort had already experienced with Nagini, but *this*... this was life with all the astonishing intimacy of dreams.

They swayed as one in the ocean breeze, gazing out together on the black sea which glittered with the ghosts of the stars above. After many long moments, Harry rolled his dark head of hair on Voldemort's shoulder, chin tipped up to the sky, to look at him. "Close your eyes."

The crimson eyes glanced suspiciously at his Horcrux before closing obediently. Harry's fingers stroked against his wristbones, his breath soft against Voldemort's bare neck. "Yeah," Harry murmured, "that's great. Now I want you to think about how we got here."

"You wish me to think about apparition?" The Dark Lord asked, taken aback. "Or are you speaking philosophically?"

Fingers pinched his wrist sharply, though Voldemort could feel Harry grinning as clearly as he could feel the water licking his toes, even with his eyes shut. "Don't be a git. I'm talking about *us*. Standing here together - happy."

"How we got here..." he mused, considering the whirlwind of circumstances that had led them both to this point, from those first sleeping glimpses to their flight from civilisation; *standing in a snow-covered street at dawn with Harry covering him in promises and kisses, the pleasures of last night and only a moment ago...* Voldemort's toes curled into the wet sand.

"Concentrate on it," Harry's voice came, warm and low against his throat. "Bottle it up. Imagine it very clearly. Are you concentrating?"

He tried to pick out the details: the crisp wind against his face, Harry's breath and hands and voice - the way his insides had tilted like a ship on the waves - the rise of inexplicable feeling as Harry's lips had touched his own - the first kiss Harry had pressed upon him - and the rampant joy that shortened his breaths. It had not merely been the boy's happiness either, he realised. Voldemort's own heart had hurt with the weight of it as those hands had slid around his head, pulling him close for kiss after breathless kiss.

Harry's warm touch, here in the present, brushed against his left wrist, guiding his wand-hand forward. "Repeat after me: *Expecto Patronum*."

It startled Voldemort out of his reverie, "I cannot," he said, resisting Harry's grip. He had spent half of his seventh year in fruitless efforts to conjure a Patronus and he did not want to embarrass himself in front of Harry. In the end, he had produced merely an illusion to satisfy Professor Kettleburn that he could visit Azkaban for his Care of Magical Creatures project. The old fool hadn't even noticed.

But the boy did not yield. "You can. Whatever you were just thinking about - I could feel it, too. Just concentrate, and say the incantation. Try it."

"I cannot," Voldemort whispered, "it is impossible."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You can talk to snakes. You came back from the dead. You can fly without a bloody broomstick. I'd say impossible just means you're more likely to do it."

"I... there are other ways to control Dementors and I... I *tried*... I practised the spell daily for six months..."

"Tom." Harry turned to face him, sliding his hands up his jaw and pressing their foreheads together. "Close your eyes and *concentrate*."

And he did not even notice the name the boy called him, as he was - in that moment - again Head Boy of Hogwarts desperate to master this one spell that eluded him. Frustrated, he closed his eyes as Harry suggested and murmured "*Expecto Patronum*." Predictably, nothing happened.

"I can read your mind, you know," Harry said dryly. "You didn't concentrate."

Voldemort hissed and shifted his feet on the uneven sand. He could not bear to fail at such a thing in front of Potter. Summoning once more that wondrous moment in Diagon Alley, Voldemort tried to submerge himself in every detail of the memory before casting the spell. A small wisp of faint, silvery mist issued from his wand, hanging in the air. The Dark Lord sighed as it dissolved.

"Excellent!" Harry beamed at him, "See - you've just got to concentrate a little harder. Think about something happy - *really* happy - the happiest memory you have... like it's happening right in front of you..."

And he thought of last night, of that beautiful loss of everything but their cherished connection when his Horcrux offered himself mind, body, and soul and Voldemort had matched such generosity with equal fervour: denial, and happiness, and rage, and burning, impossible love - "*Expecto Patronum!*"

It burst from his wand of yew, a gleaming galloping thing, tossing its wild mane in the wind. It raced around Voldemort excitedly, ran out onto the black, rolling surf and back again, illuminating the beach as though it were made of moonlight. There was little he could do but gaze at it in wondering astonishment, heart pounding as fast as its hooves.

"Your Patronus... it's..." *A horse*. Harry's mind was reeling, a thousand thoughts flying through his head as he struggled to process what had just happened. How could Lord Voldemort's Patronus be something so... mammalian? But then he remembered last year, during his Dumbledore's Army lessons - how Ginny's Patronus had also been a stallion...

"Oh..." Harry breathed, and he turned and wove his fingers through

Tom's, still holding the wand. He didn't even need to search for an adequate memory - he needed only to think of the smile on Tom's face as they'd flown, spinning and soaring, over London, laughter lost to the air as they kissed, hidden in the clouds above the city -

(*I love you*, Tom had whispered, holding him tight; *my beloved*, he'd said, tears streaming down his cheeks)

Silver blossomed from Lord Voldemort's wand, but it was not a stag that emerged. Instead, a great, monstrous snake - growing, growing, molten silver on the air that shot outward still - until there was no doubt in Harry's mind of what it was. The Basilisk chased the horse across the water, snapping playfully at its legs, never quite catching up to it, never quite able to ensnare it completely in its coils.

"My stag!" Harry cried, and scowled up at Tom. "You screwed up my bloody Patronus!"

"Well," Voldemort was grinning wickedly at Harry's horrified, furious expression, "I am afraid I shall have to cede victory to you, my beloved. This is definitely *more* fun."

THE END

Authors ' Notes: Thank you to all of you for being so patient with us and for reading this to the end. This is the end of ' In Somno Veritas '. There will not be a full sequel, but we are writing something of a Christmas Special for you all to enjoy this holiday season and we have some other Harry/Voldemort stories partially completed as well. Watch this space and thank you again for being such wonderful readers.

End Notes

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